### Forever and Never Apart

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**Forever and Never Apart**

by **Chocolatequeen**

**Summary**

After taking a year to recover from the Master, the Doctor and Rose are ready to travel again. But Time keeps pushing them forward, and instead of going back to their old life, they slowly realize that they're stepping into a new life. Friends new and old are meeting on the TARDIS, and when the stars start going out, the Doctor and Rose face the biggest change of all: the return of Bad Wolf.

**Notes**

AN: This is the series four rewrite in my series, Being to Timelessness. If you haven't read the series and want to dive in here, the high points are that the Doctor and Rose are married with a telepathic bond, and Rose's physiology has been altered by Bad Wolf in many ways—not all of which known to them yet. Most notably, she has time senses. If you want to catch the high points, I've done a [series of recaps](http://archiveofourown.org) on my blog.
New Year, New Beginning

At first, Rose thought the Christmas carols were part of her dream. She and the Doctor were dancing again, just like they had on the Titanic a year ago—only this time, without the threat of a nuclear apocalypse getting in the way.

“Rose Tyler,” he whispered as he spun her out, then pulled her close.

Rose’s free hand crept up over his shoulder to play with the hairs at the nape of his neck. “Yes, Doctor?”

“Rose, you need to wake up. Come on, love, I’m waiting for you.”

Rose blinked as she left the dream and woke up to an empty bed and the distant strains of Christmas music playing.

Finally, the Doctor teased. I’ve been trying to wake you up for thirty minutes.

Rose rolled her eyes and put on her new Christmas pyjamas—red flannel with penguins this year. Coulda just come back and pulled me out of bed, she pointed out as she left their room.

She felt him raise an eyebrow. An effort which had equal chance of ending with you pulling me back into bed, he countered. And delightful as those mornings are, it’s Christmas! Time for presents!

The library door was ajar, letting Christmas music spill out into the corridor. Rose pushed it open all the way and took a moment to admire the decorations they’d put up together.

The tree was in front of the hearth, with red and white fairy lights twinkling merrily. Two stockings hung on the mantel, and the Doctor had strategically dangled a sprig of mistletoe from the ceiling over the couch. When Rose had asked if they really needed an excuse to kiss, he’d winked and told her they didn’t need an excuse, but he’d take every opportunity.

Right now, Rose took the opportunity to look at him, kneeling in front of the tree in his dark green, reindeer print pyjamas. His joyful excitement was so different from how they’d felt last Christmas.

She had less than a minute to watch him before he realised she was there. “Rose!” He jumped to his feet and jogged to her side. “Come on—Father Christmas came!”

Rose laughed and shook her head as she settled into the corner of the couch. They’d both wrapped their gifts to each other and tucked them away in a cupboard, and the TARDIS had agreed to put them under the tree on Christmas morning. The magic of the illusion made her feel like a kid again, waking up to a pile of presents.

As soon as she was seated, the Doctor grabbed a handful of small gifts and one large box and placed them at her feet. “Do the big one last,” he requested as he gathered his own gifts, then sat down next to her.

“Yeah, you too,” Rose agreed.

They grinned at each other, then each picked up a smaller present and ripped the paper off. “Careful with that one,” the Doctor said, just in time. Rose carefully tipped up the box and a delicate Christmas ornament made of spun glass rolled out onto her palm.
“It’s made from the sand on Ekbrilon,” he explained. “That’s how it shimmers the way it does.”

Rose held it up and let the firelight reflect through the bauble. “It’s gorgeous, Doctor. I’m going to hang it up right away.”

They enjoyed the next few minutes as they unwrapped the trinkets they’d bought each other over the last year, little souvenirs from the trips they’d taken. Each one was met with a delighted laugh and a shared memory.

Finally, all that remained were the large gifts. “You first,” the Doctor insisted.

Rose picked up the box, wrapped in cheery red paper, and looked over at the Doctor. He’d been giddy all morning, but now it almost seemed like he was about to burst into laughter.

“What are you up to?” she muttered as she took the bow and put it on top of his head.

“What makes you think I’m up to something?”

“Now I know you are.” But she ripped the paper off anyway and opened the box… only to find another wrapped box inside. “Oh, you didn’t.”

He chuckled. “Keep going, Rose, or don’t you want to find out what your present is?”

Rose glared at him as she went through five different boxes. “You’re a git, you know that right?”

“Maybe, but I actually did have a reason.”

Rose opened a box a little bit bigger than a paperback book, expecting to find another, smaller box inside. Instead, resting on a nest of tissue was a thin wallet.

“Is this what I think it is?” Rose asked as she picked it up. The deep navy leather was soft in her hands, and when she flipped it open, all it contained was a blank piece of paper.

“Do you like it?” the Doctor asked. “I thought… sometimes it might come in handy for us each to have our own.”

Rose closed the psychic paper, then opened it again and showed it to him.

“‘I love it, but you’re still a git,’” the Doctor read aloud, chuckling when he got to the end. “I had to do something to disguise what it was, though,” he pointed out.

“I suppose…” Rose stretched up and kissed his cheek. “Thank you, Doctor. This was the perfect gift.”

The Doctor smiled back at her, but his gaze drifted to the box at his feet. It had been surprisingly heavy when he’d moved it over, and he was dying to find out what was inside.

Rose laughed. “Go ahead. It’s your turn.”

He bounced lightly in his seat, then picked up the box and rested it on his legs. “Well I know you didn’t use the nesting boxes trick,” he commented as he tore the paper off. “Unless your gift is a small box of bricks, this is way too heavy for that.”

“Just open it!”

Rose’s excitement caught the Doctor’s attention, and he paused to look at her. She was sitting on the
edge of the couch with her hands clenched around the cushion, and her lip was caught between her teeth.

“Why do I have a feeling my gift is about to be upstaged?” he queried as he opened the box.

He looked down at the contents, then blinked in confusion. “The complete *Harry Potter*?” Books were always an excellent gift, but a set of books they already owned dozens of copies of didn’t really match with how excited she was.

“Look closer,” Rose urged.

The Doctor pulled *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* out of the box. It was the standard Bloomsbury cover with Harry in front of the Hogwarts Express. He flipped the book open and glanced over the title page, and his hands shook a little when he saw the 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 indicating it was a first edition, first printing.

“Are they all first editions?” he asked, his voice going a little squeaky.

Rose nodded, her eyes shining. “The TARDIS and I went back to buy them all.” She pointed at the box. “And take a look at book seven!”

The Doctor carefully set down the book that would one day be one of the most sought-after first editions in history, and picked up the final volume. When he opened the front cover, two pieces of vellum fell out.

His fingers trembled when he picked one up. Paper like that was mostly used for fancy invitations, and he finally thought he knew what Rose had done.

“Invitations to the charity gala with Jo Rowling on the twenty-fifth anniversary of *Harry Potter,*” he said, feeling breathless. “How did you… this is… Rose!”

The Doctor set the book down and awkwardly pulled Rose as close as possible when he had a box in his lap. *You are incredible,* he told her as he pressed a kiss to her lips.

Later, after Christmas turkey and crackers, they went to the study with their pudding and mulled wine and curled up together in front of the fireplace. “This was a much better holiday than last Christmas,” Rose murmured.

The Doctor took a bite of sticky pudding and hummed his agreement. “For once, we celebrated Christmas without anyone trying to kill us.”

“That’s a holiday tradition I’d be happy to let die.” Rose licked her spoon. “Though if we’re going to get back to travelling, I assume we’ll run into trouble on Christmas again sometime.”

She felt his mind wander, and twisted to look up at him. “What are you thinking?”

A sheepish smile crossed his face, and a tiny bubble of excitement encompassed them both. “My present,” he admitted. “I was wondering when we can go to the gala.”

Rose pressed her lips together to hide her smile. “Well, I actually thought we could go on your birthday.” The wave of dismay that hit her made her laugh.

“But… but that’s almost a year away,” the Doctor protested.

“Is it?” Rose pretended to count the months off on her fingers. “January, February, March, April…”
The Doctor tickled her ribs, and she collapsed against him, giggling madly.

When she recovered, his full lower lip was jutting out in a pout. Rose flicked it lightly, then gave him a quick kiss. “We don’t often let anticipation build,” she pointed out. “Imagine how excited you’ll be on your birthday when you’ve been waiting for almost a year.” After a moment, she could feel his reluctant agreement and knew they’d be waiting.

“I’m not going to make you wait a year to use your present,” he muttered.

“Well, that’s because my present was a practical tool,” Rose reminded him. She thought of her new psychic paper, sitting on her vanity next to her sonic screwdriver, ready to go the next time they left the TARDIS. A moment later, she started laughing again.

The Doctor blinked down at Rose, torn between enjoying her happiness, and wondering what exactly had tickled her so much. He could feel the affection in her laughter fizzing over the bond, and he suspected he was again the source of her amusement.

Finally, her laughter died down and she looked up at him, eyes sparkling and a wide smile on her face. “So, the Christmas we met Donna, you gave me a sonic screwdriver. This year you gave me psychic paper. We already share the TARDIS—” The ship hummed her agreement—“so I’m just wondering what you’ll give me next year.” She reached out and ran her hand over his tie. “A suit to match yours?”

Rose in a suit. Rose in *his* suit. Rose wearing his suit jacket unbuttoned with the sleeves rolled up a few times. The Doctor felt lightheaded as the pictures formed in his brain.

Rose’s tongue peeked out from behind her teeth as she looked up at him through her eyelashes, and the Doctor knew she was perfectly aware of the direction his thoughts had gone.

*Tease,* he told her as he pulled her into his lap. He tilted his head and pressed his lips to hers, sighing in satisfaction when her lips immediately parted to allow him to deepen the kiss. He caught a hint of the spiced red wine they’d shared earlier, and his tongue darted into her mouth to get a better taste.

*Oh, Doctor, it’s only teasing if I don’t plan to follow through.*

Coupled with the way the nails of one hand scraped over his scalp while her other hand tugged his tie loose, the seductive promise in her voice made him groan. He tried to pull her closer, but instead, Rose broke the kiss and stood up.

“Come to bed with me, love.”

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The Doctor stared up at their bedroom ceiling, willing himself to stay still. Rose was asleep beside him, and he knew if he didn’t stop his restless twitching, he’d wake her up. But there was an itch at the back of his mind that demanded attention, and finally, he sighed and slid out of bed as silently as possible.

Clad in only his pyjama bottoms, he followed the tug he now recognised as the TARDIS into the study. *What is it, old girl?* He ran his hand over the mantelpiece. *What was so important you needed to get me out of bed to tell me?*

*Look closer,* she urged, just like Rose had that morning. She turned on the lighting they’d installed above Rose’s paintings, and he walked over to them.
He rested his fingers on the frame housing the painting she’d done on Ekbrilon, and his lips curved up in a smile. They’d had a long year, walking out of the darkness the Master had left them in, but they were finally truly home. He felt the familiar excitement to travel and quickly dampened it before his eagerness woke Rose up.

After a moment, he shifted and looked at the painting she’d finished a few weeks ago. The TARDIS hummed, and he knew this was what she wanted him to look at.

His eyes narrowed as he scrutinised the painting. He glossed over the obvious happiness of the Rose and Doctor stretched out beneath the stars—she wouldn’t have woken him up to look at that.

*Something about the planet, then,* he mused, studying what little he could make out of the landscape that, of course, was shrouded in the dark of night. They were parked in a hillside meadow, but as he looked closer, he could see flowering trees nearby. A few translucent pink petals had been caught in the wind and blew through the air above them.

Something about the colour tugged at his memory, and he let part of his mind continue working, trying to place what tree that might be. With the rest of his brainpower, he examined the painting for more clues.

*Mountains in the distance,* he realised, noticing the way the horizon cut off higher than would be expected.

His gaze moved up to the stars that his pictorial self was explaining with such animation. He shook his head again at the attention Rose paid to detail. She hadn’t simply dotted the sky with light coloured paint; she’d used different colours and brushes to indicate stars of differing sizes, grouped together in constellations.

*In fact…* His eyes narrowed and he leaned a little closer. Those constellations looked very familiar, and when he located the bright swath of the galaxy’s spiral arm cutting through the corner of the night sky, he knew he was right.

And the flowers. The trees with delicate pink blossoms. It all added up.

Bittersweet nostalgia lodged in his hearts, and the Doctor sat down on the couch and stared into the fire. It was on the tip of his tongue to ask how Rose had painted such accurate star charts for a planet she’d never visited, when he remembered the way TARDIS had forced him to notice the details of the painting.

He narrowed his eyes at the ceiling. *She won’t be happy with you if you planted an idea in her mind without asking.*

The feeling of a sentient but non-corporeal being rolling their eyes at him was still slightly surreal, even if he’d experienced it enough times in their millennium together to be accustomed to it.

The Doctor shook his head. *You know how she feels about having her brain messed with.*

The ship replied with a picture of Rose as the Bad Wolf, and the basic sense that, *We are one.*

Yeah, tell her that and we’ll see what she says.

The Doctor stood up and walked back to their room, laughing softly when the TARDIS’ hum finally took on a slightly worried note. He patted the wall as he got into bed—they both knew that however irritated Rose might be at first, she would quickly forgive the ship’s intrusion.
Rose eyed the Doctor as he navigated them through the Vortex. He’d been in an odd mood all week—not quite sad, but not happy either. *Melancholy, maybe?*

When she’d asked him about it, all he’d said was that there was someplace he wanted to take her. On New Year’s Eve, he’d clarified a moment later.

There was something so… wistful in the Doctor’s request that Rose couldn’t deny him. They’d spent a quiet week at home, catching up on Christmas specials from the last few years and reading *Harry Potter* again. The earlier agreement that they were ready to get back to travelling seemed to be put on hold, and Rose waited quietly to find out what had changed her Doctor’s mind.

“I didn’t change my mind,” he corrected as he adjusted a dial. “After tonight, I’ll be ready. I just wanted this to be our first stop. It’s… you’ll understand when you see it,” he said, then threw the lever.

The landing was gentle, and when the Doctor held his hand out, Rose took it and let him lead her out of the TARDIS. Wherever he’d taken her, it felt like spring, with a hint of soft flowers in the air and a cool breeze making her grateful she’d worn a jacket.

It was night, and millions of stars twinkled down on them as the Doctor shrugged out of his coat and laid it on the ground. He lay down and patted the spot beside him, and as Rose took her place, something about the whole image they were creating felt familiar.

Up on the hill, the TARDIS door was open, letting just enough light spill out for her to see the Doctor’s expression. He was waiting, anticipating her next words, and she knew she was right.

“This is my painting.” A quick glance around the meadow confirmed that the floral scent she’d noticed detected came from pink blossoms on the trees. “You took me to the place I painted.”

A moment later, another thought replaced that one. “Hang on, how did I paint a real place?”

The Doctor let out a soft huff of amusement. “For that, love, you’ll have to ask the TARDIS. She wanted me to bring you here, so she planted an image of this place in your subconscious.”

Rose sat up and glared at the ship. Immediately, a wave of apology washed over her.

The Doctor chuckled. “I told her you wouldn’t be happy. She seemed to think it was all right because, ‘We are one.’”

The ship’s baffled contrition made sense then, and Rose sighed and lay back down beside the Doctor. “Well yeah, when we’re Bad Wolf,” she said, talking to both the Doctor and the TARDIS. “But if we’re not, I expect a bit more courtesy if you don’t mind.”

The TARDIS agreed and apologised again, before gently pointing out a phrase Rose had missed earlier. She had wanted the Doctor to bring Rose here.

Rose rolled onto her side and studied the Doctor, taking in the subtle lines around his eyes and that same melancholy she’d sensed in him all week. She finally knew what it was—a word she’d heard once that didn’t translate well to English. *Saudade*—the longing for someone or something that was lost forever.

As she watched him, his eyes fluttered closed and he took a deep breath, catching the fragrance of the spring flowers. His left hand drifted until his fingers sank into the soft grass, and when she tuned
into the bond, she could feel him calculating every detail of the planet around him. She glanced back up at the sky, filled with stars, then at the Doctor. “Where are we, Doctor?”

He took another deep breath, then opened his eyes and looked at her. “This is Revla.”

The Doctor waited, holding still under Rose’s scrutiny. He needed her to put the pieces together. Once she understood, he could fill in the blanks, but he couldn’t bring himself to say the first words. After a long, quiet moment, she pushed herself up on her elbow and brushed her knuckles over his cheek. “And… how close are we to Gallifrey?”

He smiled, feeling something release in his hearts when Rose spoke the words. “Revla was one of the closest planets to Gallifrey. Both worlds orbited stars in the Constellation of Kasterborous. Revla was just far enough away to be part of the TARDIS pilot training course—plotting a trip here and back would be akin to… oh, I don’t know, the part of your driving exam where you go on the motorway?”

“It’s beautiful here,” Rose offered.

The Doctor snorted. “A fact which was completely wasted on most Time Lords,” he told Rose. “Admiring nature was not really a thing—that’s only the smallest of ways in which I am a renegade. Was a renegade,” he amended immediately, but for once, the pang in his hearts at the past tense was more like a dull ache than a hot fire poker.

“There’s loss,” Rose said firmly. “Because look at those stars, Doctor. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

He nodded. “I made my trip at night, and that was the first thing I noticed about Revla. So many stars, all waiting to be explored.”

Rose scooted closer to him and rested her hand on his chest. “Tell me about them,” she requested.

The Doctor scanned the sky for a system that Rose would know. “Oh!” He pointed to the top left quadrant. “See that dull yellowish star? No, not that one—the bigger one, close to the red giant.”

“Yeah, I see it.”

“Well, orbiting that star are two planets you know—Raxacoricofallapatorius and Clom.”

“Home of the Slitheen and Absorbaloff.” Rose chuckled. “I haven’t thought of either of those adventures in so long.”

“Me either,” the Doctor admitted. “The Slitheen would be what… almost six years ago now.” He rubbed at his eyebrow. “Blimey, time flies.”

Rose poked him in the ribs. “Even for a Time Lord?”

“Especially for a Time Lord,” he agreed. “Because I can see all of time spread out before me, but I can’t stop it from moving. I can’t stop things from changing. And I can’t…” He took a deep breath. “I can’t undo some things.”

Finding and losing the Master had forced the Doctor to deal with the guilt of what he’d done yet again. Having Rose at his side and in his mind greatly reduced the loneliness of being the Last of the Time Lords, but it couldn’t wipe away the results of his actions. All the children who had died that day, guilty of nothing more than being born on the wrong planet.
But after a moment, he forced himself to shove those thoughts back behind the door where he usually kept them hidden. As he’d just told Rose, he couldn’t undo it, and if that was the case, dwelling on it wouldn’t help.

The Doctor pointed at starless spot in the sky. “Right there. That’s where Gallifrey was.”

They were quiet for a minute, then Rose said, “Does it… it doesn’t feel like it hurts you as much to talk about it as it used to.”

The Doctor sighed. “It’ll always hurt,” he said, his voice soft. “But when I look at the sky here, and I see all the stars and all the worlds I’ve visited since I left home, and all the ones I still haven’t touched, I remember why I had to end the War. Because if I’d let the Time Lords and Daleks continue fighting, all of this would have ended instead.”

He reached up and brushed a strand of hair out of her face. “And you, Rose. You’re an even greater reminder. Seeing the stars reminds me of the broad, universal importance of ending the war, but being with you makes it personal.” He gestured at their surroundings—the meadow, the flowering trees encircling it, the mountains in the distance. “If I’d landed here six years ago, right after I ended the War, I wouldn’t have been able to see the beauty of it. War steals that from you. But then I met you, and your… your passion, and joy, and the wonder on your face every time we step out of the TARDIS…”

For once, words failed him, and instead, he focused on their bond and made sure she understood that meeting her had done more than just save his life. It had given him permission to enjoy life again.

Rose blinked back tears. “That’s why I love travelling with you, too. Because I thought I was trapped in that life, watching telly and eating beans on toast. Everyone said I couldn’t expect to have anything more. But I met you and I realised I could do more. I could save the world. And I could see the stars.”

There were no fireworks, but the Doctor and Rose could feel the moment the calendar turned over, bringing a new year and new opportunities. It was the perfect time to let go of the past and step into the future.

He drew a deep breath. “Well then, Rose Tyler. Where are we going to go first?”

She rested her head on his shoulder and they looked up at the stars together. Finally, she lifted her hand and pointed. “That way.”

The Doctor followed where she pointed, immediately recognising the star system. “That way?” he whispered in her ear.

Rose brought her hand down and nodded. He wrapped his arm around her, holding her close as they both felt the first hint of exhilaration shiver through them.

“Yeah. That way.”
Hey, I'm pretty sure everyone here is fairly caught up, since AO3 makes it easy to follow a series. However, in case there's anyone who missed the two stories I posted over the winter, set in between Time is Still A-Flying and this one, I encourage you to read them, or to check out my [recap posts](#) on Tumblr.

In addition to covering Voyage of the Damned, those two stories also show the Doctor and Rose healing from the YTNW. Their lighthearted teasing and happiness in this story will probably seem out of place if you didn't see that.

The Doctor smirked the next morning as he set course for the planet Rose had chosen. He wouldn’t tell her where they were going, but obviously something about her random selection of a star system amused him. “You picked your planet,” he insisted. “Now you can wait until we land to learn anything about it.”

Rose sighed and sank back into the jump seat. “You just want me to be completely unprepared for how gorgeous it is, I bet. You want that look of wonder.”

That got an actual shout of laughter from him. “You know me so well, love, but this time I’m afraid you’re dead wrong.”

The TARDIS landed before Rose could resort to begging. The Doctor leaned back against the railing and gestured to the door. “After you, Rose.”

Rose ran through the doors and stopped dead in her tracks three feet from the TARDIS. She turned in a slow circle, taking in the river just behind them, spanned by a green bridge, and the palace and abbey on her right. Big Ben chimed the hour, and she couldn’t help it—she threw her head back and laughed.

“Earth?” she gasped. “Of all the planets in the galaxy, I chose Earth?”

The Doctor’s eyes sparkled down at her. “Yes, you did.”

A tingle of awareness nudged at Rose, and her laughter quickly died. “Maybe there’s a reason,” she mumbled. “Do you feel that, Doctor? The feeling that there’s something wrong going on?”

His eyes narrowed and he scanned their surroundings quickly. “Something just out of reach,” he agreed. “Maybe this wasn’t a completely random selection—or maybe the TARDIS nudged the date to a point in Earth’s history that needs our help.”

Rose held out her hand. “Shall we, Doctor?”

He grinned and accepted her hand. “Allons-y, Rose Tyler.”

It didn’t take long to find the reason the TARDIS had brought them to London in January of 2009. A snippet of overheard conversation as they walked through St. James’ Park, an ad plastered to a pub wall, and finally, a brief news piece on the telly all pointed the way.
“So,” Rose said as they made supper together that evening. “Adipose Industries?”

The Doctor nodded. “A miracle diet pill? In my experience, if something seems too good to be true—”

“It’s probably aliens,” Rose finished with a cheeky smile.

After they ate, they did a little digging into the company itself, looking for their way in. The Doctor tapped an announcement on the company’s homepage. “Press briefing tomorrow, brilliant! We can sneak in the back door before it starts and watch from behind the scenes—stay out of sight.”

Rose shook her head and pointed at another pane. “One million happy customers in London alone,” she read. “I want to learn more about the people buying into this plan.”

She looked up at the Doctor. “I suppose… we do have two pieces of psychic paper. We could do both? You could do your clandestine investigation while I pose as a temp and get access to their client information?”

It was a good plan. It was also an excellent way to test if they were really ready to travel again. It wouldn’t work if the Doctor’s fear of losing her made him unwilling to split up when the situation called for it.

But a smile was already stretching across his face. “Even better,” he agreed. “A two-pronged attack. Killing one bird with two stones.”

“I think you’ve got that last one backwards,” Rose said drily.

“Eh, I’d rather not kill birds anyway.” He nudged her shoulder. “But I’d love to solve the mystery of Adipose Industries with you.”

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The Doctor leaned against the wardrobe, watching Rose get ready. Instead of her preferred practical outfits of jeans or loose trousers and shirts, she wore a pair of dressy charcoal grey trousers and a white button-down shirt. Her hair was twisted up in a sleek knot, held in place by at least twenty pins that he only knew were there because he’d watched her push them in.

She pulled on her blazer and made sure the collar sat right, then picked up the chain with her TARDIS key. The eyes of the wolf charm glinted back at him in the mirror as she latched it securely behind her neck, then tucked the key and charm under her shirt.

Finally, she grabbed a clutch purse and slid her mobile and psychic paper into it, then turned to face him. “How do I look?”

“Beautiful.”

Rose rolled her eyes. “I mean, do I look like I’m ready to work in an office?”

For the first time, the Doctor felt a glimmer of insecurity from her. He narrowed his eyes, but it only took a second to suss out the reason. She’d never done office work before, and she was afraid she’d mess up.

Rose looked down at her trousers, picking non-existent lint off her leg. The Doctor stepped closer and pressed his hand to her cheek and waited for her to look at him. “You’ll be brilliant, Rose,” he promised her. “I have complete faith in your abilities.”
She smiled and turned her head to kiss his palm. “Thank you, Doctor.”

The Doctor and Rose walked hand-in-hand until they were just one street away from the modern glass building housing Adipose Industries. “Meet you back at the TARDIS at 6:00?” he confirmed. “We can go get chips for dinner.”

Rose grinned up at him, her eyes twinkling. “You know the way to my heart,” she teased.

He leaned down to kiss her. *I certainly hope so,* he told her as his lips caressed hers for just a moment. *I love you… Rose Lewis,* he said, using the pseudonym she’d settled on.

Rose pulled back from the kiss and tugged on the striped tie she’d bought him in 1969. *Love you too, John Smith. And you be careful.*

*Oh, I’m always careful.* He walked backwards a few steps without looking away from Rose. When she groaned and shook her head, he winked and spun away from her.

Instead of approaching the building from the front, he cut down a side street and went to the back door, as planned. It was child’s play to break in through the fire exit with the sonic screwdriver, and he found himself in a utility corridor that reminded him of the tunnels H. C. Clements had had running under the Thames—exposed ductwork and stark lighting.

A security guard approached him, and the Doctor had the psychic paper out before the man could even ask what he was doing down here. “John Smith, Health and Safety,” he said. The guard nodded, and he slid the leather wallet back into his pocket.

Calling himself John Smith sounded strange after three years of always giving Tyler as his last name. But Rose was using a false name for the first time, and he didn’t want to draw attention to who she really was by using Tyler.

When he reached the sound booth at the back of the lecture hall, the young man manning the station tried to block his entrance. The Doctor held up the psychic paper. “Health and Safety.” The young man raised an eyebrow, and the Doctor added, “Film department,” before sliding in through the door.

On the stage below them, a slim, blonde woman in a black dress and heels was smirking at a crowd of reporters over the rim of her glasses. “Adipose Industries, the twenty-first century way to lose weight. No exercise, no diet, no pain. Just lifelong freedom from fat. The Holy Grail of the modern age. And here it is.” She held up a small, red-and-white capsule. “You just take one capsule. One capsule, once a day for three weeks, and the fat, as they say…”

She gestured to the screen behind her, and the company slogan appeared. “The fat just walks away,” a male voice said in a voiceover.

One reporter in the front row waved her hand. “Excuse me, Miss Foster. If I could? I’m Penny Carter, science correspondent for The Observer. There are a thousand diet pills on the market, a thousand con men stealing people’s money. How do we know the fat isn’t going straight into your bank account?”

*Oh, very good, Penny,* the Doctor thought. *Very good indeed.*

Miss Foster’s mouth had twisted into a grimace while Penny asked her question, and now she shook her head, a disappointed frown on her face. “Oh, Penny, if cynicism burnt up calories, we’d all be as
thin as rakes. But if you want the science, I can oblige.”

She took her glasses off and pointed at the screen again, and an informative reel began, with the same voice doing the voiceover. “Adipose Industries.” The company logo transitioned to a diagram of an overweight human body, putting a pill into its mouth. “The Adipose capsule is composed of a synthesised mobilising lipase, bound to a large protein molecule.”

**What kind of mobilising lipase now?** The Doctor put his glasses on and frowned at the screen. The explanation sounded very scientific and impressive, but to someone who understood science, it was off by just enough to sound fake.

“The mobilising lipase breaks up the triglycerides stored in the adipose cells, which then enter the body’s waste system, leading to the spontaneous excretion of fat.”

The Doctor shook his head. There it was again—most scientists would not say adipose cells. The standard nomenclature was fat cells that made up adipose tissue.

The film ended, and Miss Foster gestured at the audience with her glasses. “One hundred percent legal, one hundred percent effective.”

“But, can I just ask,” Penny pressed, “how many people have taken the pills to date?”

Miss Foster sighed and put her narrow framed glasses back on. “We’ve already got one million customers within the Greater London area alone, but from next week, we start rolling out nationwide. The future starts here. And Britain will be thin.”

Rose stared up at the skyscraper and swallowed hard, then straightened her blazer and marched in through the revolving door. The phone rang as she entered the airy atrium, and she waited for the receptionist to finish her call before holding out the psychic paper.

“Rose Lewis. Tardis Temp Agency sent me over, said you need someone to work as a sort of gopher for the day?”

The woman looked at the paper, then smiled at Rose. “Not down here, but I bet they do upstairs where the phone banks are. Miss Foster wants them to sell more, so the fewer clerical tasks they have to do, the better.”

She pushed back from her desk and put up a “be right back” sign. “I’ll take you up to human resources so we can get your paperwork started.”

It took nearly an hour for Rose to fill out the paperwork with her fake information, get a quick tour of where the break room and toilets were, and finally be deposited by the phone banks with an Indian woman named Clare.

“Thank God,” the young woman muttered when the human resources person explained what she was there to do. “I don’t have time to file my paperwork and keep up with sales. Here, I’ll show you what to do.”

She led Rose around the outskirts of the network of cubicles to a small, windowless room filled with filing cabinets. A desk on one side of the room was loaded with files waiting to be put away, nearly burying a computer.

Clare grabbed a file off the top. “All of these are for former customers,” she explained. “They go in
the drawers directly behind you, filed by customer number, which you’ll find here.” She tapped the top left corner of the information sheet. “You’ll have to look through each file to make sure the agent included their outtake form before dropping the folder in here—they’re supposed to, but not everyone does.”

“What do I do if it’s missing?” Rose asked.

“Print it out.” Clare jiggled the mouse, and the computer woke up. “Just type in the customer number here, and all the forms on them will pop up. Select the outtake form”—she demonstrated as she talked—“and print.”

A second later, they heard a printer start on the other side of the wall, and Rose stuck her head out the door and spotted the laser printer by a large ficus. “That sounds simple enough,” she agreed.

A stack of boxes along the wall caught her attention as Clare was leaving. “What’s in those?” she asked.

Clare glanced over. “Oh, those are the pendants we give out to every new customer,” she said. “Now… if you have questions, you can come find me, but I’ve really got to go.”

“Yeah, right. Sorry.” Clare disappeared and Rose set to work.

It was already stuffy in the room, so Rose unbuttoned her blazer and draped it over the back of her chair before sitting down. She spent a few minutes filing, just so she’d have progress to show Clare if she came back, then she started digging deeper into the client files.

She’d just found the option to print the entire client list when she heard the Doctor’s voice from the other side of the door. “John Smith, Health and Safety,” he explained, and she pictured him, flashing the psychic paper at whoever had stopped him.

The doorknob turned, and Rose swivelled her chair so she was facing the door. He stopped for a moment when he caught sight of her, then a slow smile spread across his face. “Hello, Miss Lewis,” he said smoothly as he stepped inside and closed the door behind him. “I’m John Smith with—”

“Health and Safety, I heard,” Rose interrupted.

He arched an eyebrow. “That’s right. I need some information, and I hope you’ll be able to help me.”

Rose leaned back in her chair and folded her hands demurely in her lap. “Well, Mr. Smith, I was warned you were coming, so I took it upon myself to search for something that might help you. I could print you a complete client list, if you would like.”

The Doctor pressed his tongue to the back of his teeth and pretended to consider. “Yes…” he said, dragging out the sibilant sound. “I think a client list would probably give me the information I need.”

Despite his feigned nonchalance, this was obviously exactly the kind of information he’d hoped she’d find. A thrill of pride went through Rose as she turned to the computer and hit the print button. “It’ll print out just on the other side of the wall here.”

He opened the door and stuck his head out. “Right here by the plant?”

“Yeah, that’s it.”

He ducked back into the room suddenly, and a woman’s strident tones filled the cubicle area before
Rose could ask him what was wrong. “Excuse me, everyone, if I could have your attention.”

They heard shuffling sounds of chairs being pushed back and people standing up, then she continued. “On average, you’re each selling forty Adipose packs per day. It’s not enough. I want one hundred sales per person per day. And if not, you’ll be replaced. Because if anyone’s good in trimming the fat, it’s me. Now. Back to it.”

“Blimey,” Rose muttered. “She’s not exactly a people person, is she?”

“Not really.” He opened the door a crack and peeked out, then smiled at Rose. “But she’s gone now, so I’ll grab that list and—”

The Doctor’s voice trailed off when Rose slid in between him and the door, latching it again. “I’m stuck here all day,” she said, taking the Doctor’s tie and using it to pull him closer, “but maybe later…” She looked up at him through her eyelashes and hid a smile when she saw his Adam’s apple bob.

“What about later?” he asked, his voice husky.

Rose put her hands on his chest and slid them up until she’d linked them behind his neck. “Well…” she whispered against his lips. The Doctor’s hands settled on her hips, pulling her closer. “You be health; I’ll be safety?”

She felt his chuckle reverberate through her when she pressed her lips to his. He took a half step forward, and she found herself with her back to the door and the Doctor’s hands settling on her bum.

But after a moment, Rose pushed against his chest and shook her head when he took a step back. “I said later, Mr. Smith,” she reprimanded, pleased by how even she managed to keep her voice.

The Doctor blinked, then dropped his hands to his sides. “That you did, Miss Lewis. I apologise. I hope you’ll consider that my enthusiastic agreement with your plans, however.”

Rose pivoted so she was back by the desk, her hands clasped primly in front of her. “Excellent, Mr. Smith. I get a lunch break in twenty minutes. Meet me on the corner out front.”

The Doctor waved, then left the room. Rose took a deep breath as soon as she was alone—staying in character had been both harder and easier than she’d expected.

She’d barely sat down when the door opened, and the Doctor stuck his head into the room. “Ah… me again,” he said, tugging on his ear.

Rose arched an eyebrow and waited to hear why he was back.

“Could you print it again? Somehow, it didn’t come out.”

“That’s weird,” she muttered as she returned to the list on the computer. “Close the door, love,” she told him. “This will take just a minute.”

She felt his curiosity as he scanned the room. “What are these?” he asked, walking over to the boxes she’d noticed earlier.

“Oh, Clare says they give one of those to every new customer.”

The Doctor grabbed a box and pulled the pendant out. “I think I need to take one of these with me,” he said as it swung in front of him. “Just in case…”
Rose nodded absently and made a mental note to grab one for herself before leaving. If he needed to take one apart to examine it, they’d still have one intact.

“There,” she said when they heard the printer start. “You’d better get out there before it disappears again.”

“Thank you, Rose.”

Rose smiled up at him, and he bent down to kiss her quickly.

“I’ll see you for lunch.”

When he was gone—for real, this time—Rose sighed and returned to her filing. Fifteen minutes left…

oOoOoOoOo

“So, you’re not going back to work, I take it?” the Doctor commented a few hours later as his fingers idly traced patterns on Rose’s bare back.

She sat up and shrugged. “Not much point. We’ve got the customer list and the pendants. I’m not going to learn much more about the company by poking around the files. Plus, that room was hot.”

“Fair enough.” He reached for his jacket and dug into the pocket for the pendant. “I’d like to take a closer look at this. I think I have a magnifying glass in the console room.”

Rose sighed and slid out of bed. “I guess that means it’s time to get dressed.” She pulled on jeans and a t-shirt while the Doctor put his suit back on.

In the console room, she pulled the customer list out of the Doctor’s coat pocket while he rummaged around in the drawers beneath the console for a magnifying glass. “I’ll go over this while you see if there’s anything funny about the pendant.”

A distracted hum was her only answer, and Rose shook her head fondly at him as she settled onto the jump seat to study the list. Once her Doctor became engrossed in an experiment, it could take a force of nature to pull him away from it.

An hour later, she hadn’t discovered any patterns in the customers. She was about ready to see if she could get the Doctor’s attention when he rocked back on his heels and put the magnifying glass in his pocket.

“Oh, fascinating.” He held the pendant up. “Seems to be a bio-flip digital stitch, specifically for collecting and monitoring biodata.”

“You mean that thing can keep track of a person’s heart rate and stuff?” Rose asked.

“Yep. And it’s coded to sync with one person, and one person only. Plus…” He frowned at it. “I think there’s a secondary signal piggybacking on the primary signal. So while the pendant is sending information back to Adipose Industries about how the customer is doing, it’s also receiving instructions from the main computer.”

Rose sat up straight. “But if it’s linked to the person’s biodata…”

The Doctor nodded grimly. “This little pendant gives Adipose Industries the ability to kill any of their customers, without warning.”
The printed list Rose held in her lap suddenly seemed twice as heavy, now that she knew every name on it was a potential victim. “So, what now?” she asked.

The Doctor dropped the pendant into his pocket and leaned against the console. “Well, first we’re going to get chips, because I think we’re both ready for supper. And then”—He nodded at the list Rose held—“we’ll pick a name and go talk to one of the Adipose customers. I’d like a little more information before taking Miss Foster on directly.”

Rose took the top sheet and handed it to the Doctor. “Pick out a name. I’m going to put my office clothes on again, so I look like I’m working.”

Two hours later, the Doctor and Rose turned down a walk that led to a nice brick house. The front door was set with two panels of frosted glass, decorated with red stained glass roses.

“Ready?” the Doctor asked Rose as he reached for the knocker. She nodded, and he gave two sharp raps.

A moment later, a tall, slim man with brown curly hair opened the door and looked from the Doctor to Rose with a curious frown on his face.

“Mr. Roger Davey? I’m the Doctor, and this is Rose Tyler. We’re calling on behalf of Adipose Industries,” the Doctor explained as he flashed the psychic paper. “Just need to ask you a few questions.”

Roger’s eyes widened in recognition and he stepped back to allow them to enter the house. “Can I get you a cup of tea?” he asked as he led them to a sparsely furnished living room.

“If it’s not a bother,” Rose said immediately, cutting off the Doctor’s refusal. Roger nodded, and Rose continued. “Milk for me, and three sugars and a splash of milk for my partner.” He disappeared into the kitchen, and the Doctor looked at Rose, an eyebrow arched in question.

It’s rude to just refuse, Doctor, she told him. Now sit down. You’re not gonna loom over him while we ask him about the pills; he’ll feel like he’s being interrogated.

They sat down somewhat awkwardly on a small love seat, trying to leave enough space between them that Roger Davey wouldn’t suspect they were more than just coworkers.

A moment later, Roger returned. He handed them their tea, then sat down on the black arm chair facing the love seat. “What did you want to know?” he asked, holding his own cuppa somewhat nervously.

The Doctor took a sip of tea and leaned back against the arm of the love seat. “How long have you been taking the pills?”

“I’ve been on the pills for two weeks now,” Roger told them. “I’ve lost fourteen kilos.”

The Doctor frowned. Fourteen kilos in fourteen days. “That’s the same amount every day?” he asked, wanting to make sure the number wasn’t a coincidence.

The Doctor’s quick realisation loosened Roger up a little, and he nodded eagerly. “One kilo exactly. You wake up, and it’s disappeared overnight.” He paused, and a frown creased his forehead. “Well, technically speaking, it’s gone by ten past one in the morning.”
“That’s a little precise,” Rose said. “How do you know?”

Roger shrugged. “That’s when I get woken up. Might as well weigh myself at the same time.”

Rose tapped her fingers on the side of her cup. “You get woken up every day at ten past one in the morning?”

He leaned forward in his chair, tea forgotten. “It is driving me mad. Ten minutes past one, every night, bang on the dot without fail, the burglar alarm goes off.”

*What if they took mobilising lipase literally?* the Doctor wondered. “Show me the burglar alarm,” he requested.

Roger led them back out the front door and pointed at the red box affixed to the brick wall. “I’ve had experts in, I’ve had it replaced, I’ve even phoned Watchdog. But no, ten past one in the morning, off it goes.”

“But with no burglars?” Rose clarified.

Roger shook his head, his hands on his hips. “Nothing. I’ve given up looking.”

The Doctor thought he finally knew what was happening though, and if he was right… “Tell me, Roger. Have you got a cat flap?” He waited impatiently while Roger blinked at the unexpected question, but after processing it for a moment, he nodded and led them back inside.

As soon as the door was closed, the Doctor got down on the floor and lifted the flap.

A moment later, Roger crouched down beside him. “It was here when I bought the house. I’ve never bothered with it, really. I’m not a cat person.”

“No, I’ve met cat people,” the Doctor said absently, his mind racing. “You’re nothing like them.”

“It’s that what it is, though?” Roger asked. “Cats getting inside the house?”

The Doctor launched into a ramble to hide his wince. “Well, thing about cat flaps is, they don’t just let things in, they let things out as well.”

“Like what?” a baffled Roger asked after a brief pause.

Rose had been following along with the conversation, and once she understood the Doctor’s suspicion, she felt sick to her stomach. “The fat just walks away,” she said, quoting the slogan she’d seen at the top of every customer file.

The Doctor and Roger stood up, and Rose held out a hand to Roger. He shook it, looking at her and the Doctor bemusedly. “Thanks so much for your help, Mr. Davey.” She bit her lip for a moment, then added, “Tell you what, maybe you could lay off the pills for a week or so.”

Before Roger could reply to that, something in the Doctor’s pocket beeped. “Oh!” He pulled a three-pronged gizmo out and looked at it. “Got to go, sorry,” he said, then raced off. Rose shook her head and shrugged at the thoroughly baffled Roger Davey before chasing after the Doctor.

They ran down the street, turning corners as the Doctor’s gizmo led them to… something—Rose didn’t know what yet. At one point, the Doctor stopped and tapped the device against the heel of his hand until it gave them a new heading, and they took off running again.

The Doctor skidded to a stop when his device started flashing madly. “I don’t understand,” he
muttered. “We should be right on top of it.”

“Right on top of what?” Rose asked. Then she heard tires squealing behind her, and barely had time to grab the Doctor and yank him out of the way of the black van careening down the street.

As the van passed, the light on his device turned solid red. They gave chase, cutting through an alley trying to catch the van, but finally, the Doctor slowed and and dropped the detector back into his pocket.

“Gone,” he said.

Rose sighed. She was ready to go home, and she didn’t really want to walk. “I don’t suppose we could find a cab in this neighbourhood,” she said, only to spot one driving slowly down the street behind them, its light turned on to indicate it was looking for a fare.

The Doctor sprinted for it, catching it before it had gone down another street. He’d just given the driver an address near where they’d parked the TARDIS when Rose joined them.

“Lucky thing for us that you were here tonight,” she told the cabbie as she slid into the backseat beside the Doctor.

The driver grunted. “Luck had nothing to do with it, sweetheart,” he said. “I had a fare tonight, but when I got there, she was just gone. Now I ask you, what kind of person does that? Most nights, I’d be lucky to find someone all the way out here to make the drive worth my time.”

“Well, we’re helping each other out then,” Rose said, and the driver nodded sharply.

Rose leaned against the Doctor and he draped an arm around her shoulders. **So what were we tracking?**

> **While you were getting ready earlier, I took my old timey-wimey detector and rigged it to track that secondary transmission. I wanted to know if anyone from Adipose Industries sent instructions to one of their little pendants.**

> **Clever, Rose praised.**

> The Doctor straightened his tie, preening slightly. **I have my moments.**

> **And what about the van? And the fat just walks away?**

He sobered. **Ah. Well, I’m a bit embarrassed I didn’t realise it earlier, but then, seeding a level five planet is against galactic law.**

> **Seeding? Rose wrinkled her nose. That doesn’t sound good.**

> **It’s not. It’s really, really not.** He sighed and ran his hand through his hair. **Adipose isn’t just a word for fat. There’s also a species known as Adipose. Their bodies are about 90, 95% fat.**

> **Rose put her hand over her mouth, trying to keep her chips down. You mean those pills take one kilo of fat from the customer each night, turn it into a little alien, and then…**

> **They just walk away.**

> oOoOoOoOo

The next afternoon, Rose leaned back in the jump seat and watched the Doctor land the TARDIS
back in the alley. They’d gone into the Vortex the night before so Rose could get the four hours of sleep she needed, then they’d skipped ahead to afternoon. “No reason to skulk about for hours when we could just get there when we want to,” the Doctor had pointed out.

When the TARDIS landed, Rose jumped up and put on a baseball cap, then grabbed the bag she’d packed with sandwiches and a thermos of tea. The Doctor swung his coat on and adjusted the collar, then followed her down the ramp.

She paused when she pushed the door open, and looked back at him. “We parked in a different spot.”

He nodded and stepped with her into the alleyway. “The TARDIS has a perception filter, but it never hurts to move every now and then so people don’t get too curious.”

Together, they walked past the blue car parked twenty feet away and down the street to the back of the building. Rose pulled the brim of her hat low over her eyes while the Doctor sonicked the door open, then followed him down the corridor to the storage room he’d claimed to stake out for their use the day before.

She took in the tiny confines and blinked. It was more of a storage cupboard than a room.

“Ah, you’re not seeing it all,” the Doctor told her. He cleared the cleaning supplies away from the wall and pointed the sonic at the wall.

Rose’s eyes widened when the wall opened to reveal a computer terminal. “So while we wait, we try to hack the Adipose server?”

He grinned at her. “Exactly.”

Rose leaned against the wall and watched him work. It was fascinating to see the way his fingers flew over the keyboard, and she loved watching the fluctuating expressions on his face.

But she couldn’t stand just watching for very long, so after ten minutes, she leaned closer to the Doctor to get a better view of what he was doing. “Can you teach me a bit?” she asked. “I’m getting better at other things, but I’m still rubbish at the kind of hacking you’re doing.”

He straightened up and shook his head. “Not this time. The whole system’s deadlocked. I’ve been trying to hack my way around it, but there’s no way I’ll be able to get in.”

Rose frowned and looked around at the small room. “So… what are we doing for the next few hours, then?”

“Oh, come on.” The Doctor sat down with his back pressed against the wall. “There’s enough room for the two of us for a few hours.”

Rose raised an eyebrow, but when he made room for her between his legs, she shrugged and sat down. “S’pose it isn’t bad,” she agreed as he wrapped his arms around her waist.

“So, what’s with the hat?” the Doctor asked once they were settled.

“Well, if I ran a company that was doing something as shady as turning my customers into a breeding ground for an alien species, I’d be on the lookout for any suspicious behaviour,” Rose explained. “Like, for instance, someone who claimed to be a temp and then disappeared after only a few hours.”
“Ahhh,” the Doctor said. “Very clever.”

“I have my moments,” Rose quipped, then giggled when the Doctor tickled her ribs for copying his line.

“The hat’s making my head itch, though.” She took it off and shook her hair out, letting it fall back around her shoulders.

“Oh! Hair in my mouth!” the Doctor protested.

Rose laughed again, then they settled in to wait.

At five till six, they pulled sandwiches out of Rose’s bag and had a quick picnic dinner. By the time they’d finished and cleaned up, it was twenty past, and the Doctor deemed it safe enough to leave their hiding place.

Everyone should be gone for the night, he told Rose as he led the way to the service elevator.
Besides, we’re going straight to the roof, so even if there are a few people lingering, we shouldn’t run into them.

They took the elevator up the top floor, then climbed the single flight of stairs that led to the roof access. “What’s the plan now, Doctor?”

He nodded at the side of the building where the window cleaner’s cradle was parked at a little platform with stairs leading up to it. “We’ll take that down, see if we can maybe find Miss Foster’s office.”

“And if we can’t?” Rose asked as they climbed the metal stairs. “That’s a long shot, after all.”

He jumped down into the cradle and Rose followed. “Then I’ll come up with a new plan,” he said breezily, winking at Rose when she rolled her eyes at him. “Even if we aren’t lucky enough to stop right in front of her office, we should be able to tell the level that has the executive offices,” he explained as he hit the button that lowered them down the side of the building. “We’ll sonic the window open and climb inside.”

“It’s a lovely view,” Rose said.

The Doctor looked away from the windows for a moment to look out at London with Rose. The river wasn’t far away, with its familiar attractions scattered along it. Tower Bridge, the London Eye, Big Ben—it was a lovely view.

He barely remembered in time that he was supposed to be watching the office building. When he turned around, they were just passing a well-lit, spacious office. He stopped the cradle just as the door opened.

The Doctor grabbed Rose and yanked her down with him as he dropped out of sight. He’d only caught a glimpse of the woman, but he was almost positive this was Miss Foster’s office. I think that’s her, he told Rose as he rummaged in his pockets for his stethoscope.

“You can’t tie me up,” he heard when he put the bell to the wall. He raised his eyebrows—that sounded like Penny, the reporter from the day before. “What sort of a country do you think this is?”

“Oh, it’s a beautifully fat country,” Miss Foster said. “And believe me, I’ve travelled a long way to
find obesity on this scale.”

“So, come on then, Miss Foster, those pills,” Penny said. “What are they?”

The Doctor slowly moved the bell up until it was pressed to the glass instead of the concrete building. Immediately, the voices were clearer.

“Well, you might just as well have a scoop, since you’ll never see it printed. This is the spark of life.”

The Doctor looked at Rose, who was watching patiently. Miss Foster caught a reporter snooping around, he told her. She’s explaining the whole plot to her now—sounds like we were right.

“And what’s that supposed to mean?” Penny demanded impatiently.

“Officially, the capsule attracts all the fat cells and flushes them away. Well, it certainly attracts them. That part’s true. But it binds the fat together and galvanises it to form a body.”

The Doctor could hear the hesitation and confusion in Penny’s voice when she asked her next question. “What do you mean, a body?”

“I am surprised you never asked about my name. I chose it well. Foster. As in foster mother. And these are my children.”

Just listening couldn’t satisfy the Doctor’s curiosity any longer, and Rose was getting restless, so he nudged her and indicated they should slowly get to their knees.

He took in the tableau quickly—Miss Foster was walking around her desk to Penny, who was indeed tied to a chair. He suspected the two guards with automatic weapons gave her plenty of motivation to do as she was told.

“You’re kidding me,” Penny said. “What the hell is that?”

The Doctor looked at the desk and immediately recognised the juvenile Adipose.

“Adipose,” Miss Foster said. “It’s called an Adipose. Made out of living fat.”

Penny squirmed in her seat, but she couldn’t get her hands free. “But… I don’t understand.”

“From ordinary human people,” Miss Foster further explained.

The Doctor was working himself into a towering rage as he considered all the galactic laws Miss Foster was breaking. There were reasons level five planets were protected. What she was doing was extremely dangerous to humans, and they had no knowledge it was happening.

Rose elbowed the Doctor, interrupting his growing anger. “Donna’s here,” she hissed, jerking her head towards the door on the other side of the room.

He looked at the door and felt his jaw go slack when he recognised the ginger woman on the other side. “Donna?”

She had a broad smile on her face and her eyes were wide with excitement. As soon as she saw them, she started talking, moving her lips exaggeratedly enough that they could read them. “Doctor? Rose!”

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Rose clap her hand over her mouth to hold her laughter in, but he was too stunned to consider how ridiculous he and Donna looked.
“But what? What? What?” he stammered, unable to even get a full sentence out.

“Oh my god!” Donna said, her head bobbing with every word.

The Doctor shook his head. This was… She was… “But how?”

“It’s me!” she exclaimed, pointing at her grinning face.

The Doctor felt like reality had gotten away from him. “Yes, I can see that,” he told her, pointing to his eyes and then to her.

Rose sat with her back against the side of the cradle and her head in her hands, her shoulders shaking with nearly-silent laughter.

“Oh, this is brilliant.”

Donna gave them a double thumbs up and looked absolutely beside herself with joy, but the Doctor couldn’t get past one simple fact. Somehow, Donna Noble had found them, over a year after they’d met her, in her timeline.

“What the hell are you doing there?” he demanded, punctuating the last three words by pointing at her. Things like this just didn’t happen. Or didn’t just happen? Maybe that was right.

Beside him, Rose got back on her knees so she could watch the conversation. *Clearly, it did, so let’s figure it out.*

Donna waved at her, then pointed at her eyes and said, “I was looking for you.” She pointed a finger at each of them as she said it.

The Doctor pointed at himself, then Rose. “What for?”

He sat back on his heels and gaped as she proceeded to tell an entire story. “I read it on the internet. Weird. Crept along. Heard them talking. Hid. You…”

“Bloody hell,” Rose muttered, realising they’d been caught at the same time Donna did.

Miss Foster looked from Donna to the Doctor and Rose, a cold smile on her face. “Are we interrupting you?”

Rose looked at Donna. “Run!” she ordered, and Donna took off.

“Get her,” Miss Foster ordered.

*Oh, no you don’t.* The Doctor sonicked the door shut so the guards couldn’t chase after Donna.

Miss Foster scowled at him. “And them,” she added, pointing at him and Rose.

“Hang on, Rose.” The Doctor pointed his screwdriver up at the controls for the cradle, taking them to the roof as fast as possible. As they soared past the dark windows, he wondered how Donna Noble had found them again, and when she would turn up next.
“How did Donna find us here?” Rose asked as they jumped out of the cradle onto the roof.

“You heard her,” the Doctor said as they ran back to the roof access door. “The internet… and weird things. I don’t know; we’ll have to ask her about it.”

Rose shook her head. “Well, if you remember, we knew we’d run into her again one day.”

They looked at each other while they ran down the stairs. This was their first trip back in their old life, and Rose didn’t think either of them had even considered taking a new companion yet.

The Doctor sighed. “The chances of her finding us at all were frankly, astronomical. There has to be a reason we’re both here, and I doubt it was just to say a quick hello and then never see each other again.”

“You’ve got that right, Sunshine,” a familiar voice said from around the corner.

Rose put on some speed and caught Donna in a hug. “I can’t believe it!” she exclaimed as she pulled back to look at her.

“I know—me either!” Donna looked at the Doctor, then blinked. “You’re wearing the same suit! Don’t you ever change?”

Rose laughed when the Doctor shook his head and rolled his eyes.

“Yeah, thanks, Donna,” he said sarcastically. “Not right now.”

Several storeys below them, a door banged against the wall of the stairwell. Rose, the Doctor, and Donna all looked down, knowing it meant the guards had figured out where they were and were almost there.

The Doctor grinned at Donna and Rose. “Just like old times!” he crowed as the three of them took to the stairs, racing for the roof.

“So Donna,” Rose asked while they ran, “what did you mean when you said you looked up weird things on the internet to find us?”

“Exactly that,” Donna said, huffing slightly. “After you left, once life got back to normal, I decided I wanted to find you—but I didn’t know where to start.”

They burst through the door onto the roof, and Rose led the way to the window cleaner’s cradle while the Doctor sonicked the door shut. She gestured to the stairs, and followed after Donna once the other woman had climbed the first couple.

Donna continued her story. “Because I thought, how do you find the Doctor and Rose Tyler? And then I just thought, look for trouble and then they’ll turn up,” she said as she dropped into the gondola.

Rose laughed as she followed her. “Oh, Donna Noble—you’re good,” she said, bumping her shoulder against the other woman’s.
Down on the rooftop, the Doctor pried open the main controls for the window cleaners’ apparatus and locked them with the sonic screwdriver, listening to Donna’s story as he worked.

“So I looked everywhere,” Donna continued. “You name it. UFOs, sightings, crop circles, sea monsters. I looked, I found them all. Like that stuff about the bees disappearing, I thought, ‘I bet they’re connected.’

_Are you catching this, Doctor?_ Rose asked. A second later, she felt his affirmative, and a discomfort that equaled hers.

As impressed as she was by Donna’s logic, it was a bit disconcerting to think they could be tracked so easily, if someone put their mind to it. Because Donna was right—if you really wanted to find them, the best thing to do was hang around where weird stuff seemed to happen. Eventually, you’d get lucky and land on the right weird thing.

Donna leaned carefully against the side of the cradle, her eyes glittering with excitement. “Because the thing is, I believe it all now. You two opened my eyes. All those amazing things out there, I believe them all. Well, apart from that replica of the _Titanic_ flying over Buckingham Palace on Christmas Day. I mean, that’s got to be a hoax.”

Rose shivered, and Donna suddenly wondered if her granddad’s story had been accurate after all. When the Doctor immediately changed the subject, she was almost certain of it.

“What do you mean, the bees are disappearing?” he asked as he climbed into the cradle with them.

“I don’t know. That’s what it says on the internet.” Donna shrugged. “Well, on the same site, there was all these conspiracy theories about Adipose Industries and I thought, let’s take a look.”

She realised belatedly that they were slowly being lowered down the side of the building. “Hang on,” she said. “They’ll just call us back up again.”

The Doctor shook his head quickly. “No, no, no, because I’ve locked the controls with a sonic cage. I’m the only one that can control it. Not unless she’s got a sonic device of her own, which is very unlikely.”

Rose groaned, and the Doctor looked at her, eyebrow raised. “What?”

Donna crossed her arms over her chest and watched their playful banter.

“You had to say that,” Rose said. “You know what’s going to happen now.”

“Oh, come on,” he protested. “What are the chances—”

The low hum of the cables controlling their descent suddenly rose in pitch, and they all fell to their knees as the cradle rocketed down the side of the building.

“You were saying?” Donna shouted.

The Doctor clung to the railing of the gondola with one hand and reached into his jacket pocket with his other, trying to find his sonic screwdriver. The jerking motion of the gondola made it harder than usual, but he finally grabbed it and managed to point it at the pulley that controlled the cable. They rocked to an abrupt stop, and he went to work immediately on the window. “Hold on. Hold on. We can get in through the window.”

But nothing happened. “Can’t get it open!” he grunted.
Donna scowled. *I am not going to die like this.* She grabbed a spanner and brandished it in his face. “Well, smash it then!”

Rose put her hand on her shoulder before she could bang it on the glass. “It won’t work, Donna. The windows in buildings like this are made to withstand nearby explosions.”

Donna started to argue, but then she and Rose heard sparks and fizzling noises from above, and they both tilted their heads back slowly.

“She’s cutting the cable,” Donna groaned, finally getting the Doctor’s attention, just in time for the cable to snap.

Donna screamed when the gondola suddenly tipped, only being held to the building by one cable now. The Doctor and Rose managed to grab onto the railing, but she flew over the edge. Her flailing arms brushed against the loose cable, and she wrapped her fingers tight around it.

Rose watched in horror as Donna soared out of the cradle into the open air. “Donna!” she and the Doctor shouted together, and they both leaned carefully over the side of the cradle, afraid of what they’d see.

Somehow, though, Donna had grabbed onto the severed cable and dangled above the streets of London. “Doctor!”

“Hold on!” The Doctor grabbed the cable and tried to pull Donna up.

“I am!” Donna retorted. “Doctor!”

It suddenly occurred to Rose that there were two cables, and Miss Foster likely wouldn’t be satisfied with just cutting through one—after all, they were still alive. She straightened up and narrowed her eyes at the woman, who’d moved to the other cable as Rose had suspected.

“Oh no you don’t.” Rose muttered as the other woman pointed her sonic at the cable. Rose pulled her screwdriver out of her pocket and used a setting she’d recently discovered to create a feedback loop between the two devices that would make Miss Foster’s spark in her hand.

Rose smirked victoriously when Miss Foster yelped. Her sonic device tumbled through the air, end over end, and Rose realised something as it got closer—if this belonged to Miss Foster, then chances were, it could work against the deadlock on the building.

She watched carefully, sliding back to stand by the Doctor so she could grab the sonic as it fell. “Gotcha!” she crowed when it dropped neatly into her hands.

She tapped the Doctor on the shoulder and held the sonic pen up. “Can you use this to get into the building?”

“How did you—” The Doctor shook his head and took it from her. “Never mind; tell me later.” He crawled up, then grabbed the intact cable and pulled himself back up so he was level with the windows.

“I’m going to fall!” Donna moaned, just like she had the day they’d met when they swung to safety on the Racnoss’ web.

“No you’re not,” Rose countered, giving a reprise of her own answer. “You’re going to be caught.”

Rose watched the Doctor for a moment, until he had the window open. He looked back at her then.
“I won’t be a minute,” he promised, then disappeared in through the window.

When he was gone, Rose sat and looked down at Donna. “The Doctor’s inside,” she told her. “I promise he’ll get you to safety in just a minute. Just hang on.”

Donna snorted. “It’s not like I can go anywhere else, is it?”

oOoOoOoOo

After tumbling into the building, the Doctor peered back out to gauge what level Donna was at. Then he raced for the stairs, going down the next three floors as fast as he could before running into Miss Foster’s office.

He could see Donna’s legs through the window, and a sigh of relief whooshed out of him as he ran over to unlock it and pull her inside.

“Is anyone going to tell me what’s going on?” Penny asked indignantly.

The Doctor looked at her over his shoulder while he used Miss Foster’s sonic device to unlock the window. “What are you, a journalist?”

“Yes.”

“Well, make it up.”

The window finally opened, and he grabbed Donna’s legs, nearly getting kicked in the face in thanks.

“Get off!” she ordered.

“I’ve got you. I’ve got you.” He struggled to get a safe hold on her as she kept squirming. “Stop kicking!”

Donna finally stilled and the Doctor was able to pull her inside. As soon as she was safe, he stuck his head out the window.

“Rose!”

“I’m on it, Doctor,” she called from above. “Why don’t you take a step back?”

Heeding her warning, he stepped to the side and watched from another window as she slid down the cable, then swung on it until she had the momentum to angle herself into the building.

The Doctor grabbed her in a quick hug the moment she landed. “Ever the gymnast,” he said, getting a laugh from her.

“I was right,” Donna said, getting their attention. “It’s always like this with you, innit?”

Rose laughed. “Always.”

The Doctor grinned at both women, feeling the thrill of adventure course through him. “And off we go!”

Rose and Donna dashed off. The Doctor made to follow them, but Penny’s sharp cry stopped him at the door. The Doctor skidded to a halt and pulled out the sonic. “Sorry!” He aimed it at her chair, and the ropes holding her there fell to the floor. “Now do yourself a favour,” he implored, though he
He caught up with Rose and Donna in the cubicle area just outside the little room Rose had been stuck in the previous morning. “Come on,” he muttered. “Let’s get out of here.”

That plan was scuttled when Miss Foster and her two goons turned the corner and blocked their path. The Doctor, Rose, and Donna all skidded to a halt. A quick perusal of the room revealed no easy escape route, and the Doctor sucked in a breath and prepared to deal with Miss Foster.

“Well, then.” Miss Foster took her glasses off and smirked at them. “At last.”

“Hi!” Rose waved at her.

Miss Foster narrowed her eyes at Rose. “Oh, I know you, Miss Lewis. They showed me security footage of you entering the building yesterday, since you just disappeared.”

The Doctor exchanged a glance with Rose, then rocked back on his heels and stuck his hands into his pockets. “Nice to meet you. I’m the Doctor.”

“And I’m Donna.”

“Partners in crime,” Miss Foster stated. “And evidently off-worlders, judging by your sonic technology.”

An idea finally came to the Doctor. “Oh, yes, I’ve still got your sonic pen.” He patted at his pockets and retrieved the device. “Nice. I like it. Sleek. It’s kind of sleek.”

He handed it to Rose, who passed it to Donna, both of them murmuring one after the other that, “Oh, it’s definitely sleek.”

Rose took the pen back from Donna and returned it to the Doctor. He held it up and looked at Miss Foster, who was wearing her glasses again. “Yeah, and if you were to sign your real name, that would be?”

She peered at them over the rim of her glasses, clearly unamused by their comedy routine. “Matron Cofelia of the Five Straighten Classabindi Nursery Fleet. Intergalactic Class.”

The Doctor nodded; that fit with what they knew. “A wet nurse, using humans as surrogates.”

She sighed and shook her head, a long-suffering smile on her face. “I’ve been employed by the Adiposian First Family to foster a new generation after their breeding planet was lost.”

“What do you mean, lost?” the Doctor demanded.

At the same time, Rose asked, “How do you lose a planet?”

Matron Cofelia looked back and forth between the two of them. “You have quite the routine going. But, to answer your question, politics are none of my concern. I’m just here to take care of the children on behalf of the parents.”

“What, like an outer space Supernanny?” Donna asked.

Amusement glinted in Matron Cofelia’s eyes. “Yes, if you like.”

“So.” Donna took a breath. “So those little things, they’re, they’re made out of fat, yeah, but that woman, Stacy Campbell, there was nothing left of her.”
Ah, that’s what triggered my tracking device last night, the Doctor realised.

“Ah, in a crisis the Adipose can convert bone and hair and internal organs,” explained Matron Cofelia matter-of-factly. “Makes them a little bit sick, poor things.”

Donna gasped and took two steps forward. Her voice shook slightly when she asked what all three of them were thinking. “What about poor Stacy?”

Out of the corner of his eye, the Doctor saw Rose reach for Donna and pull her back to stand beside her again. Then he focused on Matron Cofelia.

The Doctor lowered his eyebrows and stared her down. “Seeding a level five planet is against galactic law.”

She didn’t seem to be appropriately cowed. Instead, she simply tilted her head and returned his stare. “Are you threatening me?”

The Doctor felt the muscle in his jaw twitch; the matron’s wilful arrogance and disregard for the safety of a million humans tempted him to take her down without a warning. He took a deep breath and reminded himself that wasn’t how he worked, then shook his head.

“I’m trying to help you, Matron. This is your one chance, because if you don’t call this off, then I’ll have to stop you.”

She pursed her lips. “I hardly think you can stop bullets,” she said, and her two guards stepped forward and aimed their guns at them.

Beside him, Rose shifted to put herself between Donna and the guards. She bristled with protective anger, and he held up his hands quickly stop the guards before anyone realised that she was the real threat.

“No, hold on, hold on, hold on, hold on,” he pleaded. It was time to use the plan he’d come up with a moment ago. “One more thing, before… dying.” He reached into his pocket for his screwdriver. “Do you know what happens if you hold two identical sonic devices against each other?”

Matron Cofelia took a deep breath and pressed her lips into a thin line. “No.”

The Doctor grinned. “Nor me. Let’s find out.”

When he pressed his screwdriver and the sonic pen end to end, he got exactly the result he’d hoped for—horrendous feedback at a high enough frequency to give even him a headache.

A pane of glass shattered nearby, and Rose grabbed his elbow. “Come on, Doctor,” she shouted over the noise, and the three of them took off running again.

Rose’s ears were still ringing when they reached the stairwell. She shook her head and tapped on her temple, then called the Doctor’s name. When he spared a moment from running to glance at her over his shoulder, she raised an eyebrow.

“Let’s make sure we never do that with our screwdrivers, yeah?” she suggested.

He laughed. “You have to admit, it was the perfect distraction.”

“Oh yeah,” she agreed. “And I’m still going to be hearing it when we go to bed tonight.”
“How many flights of stairs are we going down?” Donna demanded, breaking into their conversation.

Rose looked at the number on the wall as they turned the corner. “Just three more!”

“Oh, this looks familiar,” Donna said a moment later when they burst out of the stairwell into the corridor. “I know what you meant now, Rose. Mood lighting.”

Rose grinned at the other woman and found herself really hoping this was the right time to bring her on board. “I think it’s part of the Secret Lair DIY kit,” she mused as the Doctor threw open the door to the room they’d been hiding in earlier.

Donna stood in the corridor and stared as Rose and the Doctor shoved cleaning supplies out of the tiny room. “Well, that’s one solution,” Donna said as he tossed a mop over his shoulder. “Hide in a cupboard. I like it.”

The Doctor pressed his hands to the wall, triggering the hidden latch. “I tried to hack into this thing earlier,” he said as the the panel slid open, “because the matron’s got a computer core running through the centre of the building. Triple deadlocked. But now I’ve got this”—He held up the matron’s sonic pen—“I can get into it.”

“Doctor, you know she’s going to send those guards after us,” Rose pointed out.

“Yeah, I know. Working on it.” He pushed his glasses up on his nose and peered at the map of the building. Two dots were moving towards them; those must be the guards.

The Doctor scanned the mainframe, looking for something he could use against the guards. He lit on the answer almost immediately.

“She’s wired up the whole building,” he explained as he pulled two wires out. “We need a bit of privacy.” He held the live wires together and watched the display until the guards stopped.

Donna looked at him, askance.

“Just enough to stop them,” he assured her. There was something more important on his mind than the fate of the guards, however. “Why’s she wired up the tower block? What’s it all for?”

When he grabbed an electrical conduit and sonicked it, Rose turned her attention to Donna. “The computers are really more his area of expertise,” she explained to the other woman. “Someday, when we aren’t running for our lives or trying to save the planet, I’ll get him to teach me.”

Donna’s gaze flicked from Rose to the Doctor. “You look happy,” she commented when the Doctor half-turned back to the computer.

“Yeah, we are,” Rose agreed.

Donna nodded at the Doctor’s hands. “Spaceman’s wearing a ring, so I guess you got married.”

Rose laughed. “Yeah. Only a few days after we met you, actually. We decided there wasn’t any reason to wait any longer.” She squeezed the Doctor’s shoulder. “Best decision we ever made.”

The Doctor made the happy sound in the back of his throat that was half hum, half giggle, and Donna shook her head. “That was over a year ago, and you’re still absolutely besotted.”

“What about you, Donna?” Rose asked, bypassing the explanation of how long it had been for them.
“I thought you were going to travel the world.”

Donna shook her head and looked away from them. “Easier said than done. It’s like I had that one day with the two of you, and I was going to change. I was going to do so much. Then I woke up the next morning, same old life.” She heaved a sigh. “It’s like you were never there.”

Rose listened sympathetically. She couldn’t imagine what her life would have been like if the Doctor hadn’t come back for her after she’d said no the first time. The regret had already been eating at her when she’d heard the TARDIS materialise; how much worse would it have felt after a year?

Donna took a breath and tried to shake the melancholy from her voice. “And I tried. I did try. I went to Egypt. I was going to go barefoot and everything.”

The Doctor glanced up from his electrical work, and Rose nodded at him behind Donna’s back. They were thinking the same thing. Donna wanted their life. This was why the TARDIS had brought them to London.

“And then it’s all bus trips and guidebooks and ‘Don’t drink the water,’ and two weeks later you’re back home.” She gave a half-laugh, then shrugged and met Rose’s gaze. “It’s nothing like being with you. I must have been mad turning down that offer.”

It was an obvious setup—one the Doctor pretended not to catch. They’d finally come to grips with what had happened to them on the Valiant, but he knew they both still struggled to forgive themselves for the pain the year had caused Martha and Jack. Being their friend was dangerous, and not something to be entered lightly.

Hang on, the Doctor realised, that’s from a human wedding ceremony. He pressed his tongue to the back of his teeth as he worked, then shrugged mentally. The line might be part of a wedding, but it was certainly accurate in this situation as well.

The Doctor tugged on his ear and tried to think of something to say that wasn’t an unequivocal invitation before the silence became too awkward. In the end, he was saved by the bell. “Inducer activated,” the computer announced, and an alarm chimed at them.

“What’s it doing now?” Donna asked.

The Doctor’s hearts pounded as he stared at the computer programme he still didn’t know how to stop. “She’s started the programme,” he murmured, his feet rooted to the ground in shocked horror. “Doctor!”

Rose’s voice snapped him out of his paralysis, and as the computer blandly announced that the inducer was transmitting, he dove forward. “So far they’re just losing weight, but the matron’s gone up to emergency parthenogenesis,” he explained as he worked frantically against the inducer.

“And that’s when they convert…” Donna said.

He nodded quickly. “Skeletons, organs, everything. A million people are going to die.”

He finally caught a line of code that he’d missed before. Of course! The signal is sent by the pendant, so if I introduce a new pendant, it should interfere…

“Got to cancel the signal,” he muttered as he unscrewed the pendant so he could hook it up to the mainframe. “This contains a primary signal,” he explained as he worked “If I can switch it off, the fat goes back to being just fat.”
But as soon as he got the pendant wired in, the computer spoke again. “Inducer increasing.” The alarm went haywire, no longer just the quiet beeping it had been before.

For a moment, the thought of all those people dying made the Doctor panic. He stepped back, his hands in his hair as he read the computer code, looking for a way to override the command again.

Then Rose pushed calm over the bond and he took a deep breath. Once his mind was focused, the answer was right in front of him.

“Hah!” he crowed. “You’ve forgotten I’m not working alone, Matron. Partners in crime indeed.” He went back to work on the wires, making room for another capsule. “I need the capsule you took,” he said without looking at Rose.

A moment later, two capsules were dangled in front of his face. The Doctor turned and looked at Rose and Donna, who wore matching “we got this” smirks. It was a brief glimpse of what his life would be like if he travelled with both these women—the two of them constantly saving the world while he watched.

Then he laughed, grabbed Donna’s, and got it wired into the computer. This time, the entire system shut down, and all three of them rocked back on their heels and let out breathless, relieved laughs.

A loud pulsing hum interrupted their celebration.

“What the hell was that?” Donna asked.

Rose looked up at the ceiling. “That, Donna, was the sound of a spaceship breaking atmosphere. At a guess, I’d say the Adipose have come for their children.”

The Doctor pushed his glasses back up on his nose and nodded. “Their nanny’s work is done. Time for the children to go to the nursery.”

Donna’s eyes darted around the room before settling on the Doctor. “Fine. When you say nursery you don’t mean a crèche in Notting Hill.”

“Nursery ship,” he answered quietly.

The computer switched back on. “Incoming signal,” it announced, followed by an alien voice giving orders.

“What’s going on, Doctor?” Rose asked after he pushed the button for the top floor. “I mean, I heard the message… something about clearing their names or something, yeah?”

He nodded grimly. “Remember, what they’ve done is illegal. They seeded a level five planet.”
Rose’s eyes widened. “And the one person who can truly connect them to the incident is the nanny.”

They reached the top floor and ran for the stairs that led to the roof. The Adiposian nursery ship hovered over the street in front of them, with thousands of baby Adipose being transported into the ship in transporter beams.

“What you going to do then?” Donna asked. “Blow them up?”

The Doctor recoiled. “They’re just children. They can’t help where they come from.”

Donna flushed. “It’s just, last time…”

Ah. He unbent slightly when he understood where the question came from. “Even juvenile Racnoss are capable of devouring half a planet,” he explained. “I didn’t have a choice last time.” She nodded, and they watched the baby Adipose stream into the ship.

Rose chuckled, and the Doctor looked over at her. “Well, it’s just… look at them,” she said, pointing to the blue transporter beam filled with thousands of Adipose. “They’re so… cute.”

“And made of fat,” Donna said. Some of the Adipose squeaked as they moved by and waved goodbye. “I’m waving at fat,” she said, repeating the point.

“It’s actually not a bad diet plan,” Rose commented. “Oh!” She pointed at the matron. “There she is!”

They ran over to the edge of the roof, and the matron hovered in place in front of them. “Matron Cofelia, listen to me,” the Doctor begged.

She smirked and shook her head. “Oh, I don’t think so, Doctor. And if I never see you again, it’ll be too soon.”

“Oh, why does no one ever listen?” he growled to Rose and Donna. “I’m trying to help,” he told the matron. “Just get across to the roof. Can you shift the levitation beam?”

She looked up at the ship, then back at them. “What, so that you can arrest me?”

“Just listen. I saw the Adiposian instructions. They know it’s a crime, breeding on Earth. So what’s the one thing they want to get rid of? Their accomplice.”

“I’m far more than that,” Matron Cofelia said smugly. She held her arms out in a gesture to encompass all the baby Adipose being taken into the ship. “I’m nanny to all these children.”

Her smugness was going to get her killed, and even if she was unpleasant, she didn’t deserve that. Before the Doctor could argue again, Rose pushed forward, leaning over the edge of the building with her arms stretched out. “Don’t you get it?” she yelled. “Your job is done—you delivered the kids. What do they need you for now?”

Rose’s words were still hanging in the air when the levitation beam shut off. They all saw the moment Matron Cofelia realised they were right, but it was too late. Her eyes widened in panic, and then she fell, screaming, to the hard pavement below, landing with a sickening thud.

“Oh, god, I’m gonna be sick,” Rose mumbled, pressing her hands to her face. Donna turned and buried her face in the Doctor’s shoulder.

The Doctor watched the ship, and a few moments later, it accelerated, drawing Rose and Donna’s
attention away from the body on the ground. They watched the ship leave the atmosphere, then took
the elevator back down to the ground floor.

When they exited the building, an ambulance was already on the scene, taking care of the matron’s
body. The Doctor sighed and rummaged in his pocket for the sonic pen, tossing it in the bin nearby.

“Oi!” The sharp cry got their attention, and they turned around to see Penny hobbling towards them,
strapped to a chair once again. “You three! You’re just mad. Do you hear me? Mad!” She stopped
and glared at them. “And I’m going to report you for… madness,” she declared, before hobbling off.

“You see, some people just can’t take it,” Donna murmured.

The Doctor shook his head. “No.”

“And some people can.” Donna hesitated, then looked at the Doctor and Rose. “You didn’t say
anything earlier, when I mentioned that I’d like to travel with you.”

Rose took the Doctor’s hand and started for the TARDIS. “Come on, let’s walk while we talk,” she
said.

“I don’t want to be… I don’t know, pushy,” Donna said as they left the building and emergency
vehicles behind, “but I let my chance go once, and I don’t want to do it again. Not without making it
clear what I want.”

The Doctor took a deep breath. “The thing is, Donna… Travelling with us can be dangerous. We
had a friend, Martha. And… well, the last trip we took with her turned out to be a bit more than
she’d signed on for. She was brilliant,” he said quickly, “but it really… it ruined half her life,” he
explained quietly.

Rose flinched. She tried not to think about what Martha had gone through during the Year That
Never Was, but sometimes the thought crept up on her anyway. The Doctor brushed his thumb over
her knuckles, and she forced her mind back to the present, and Donna.

She offered the other woman a smile and a slight shrug. “So that’s the life we lead.” They slowed
and came to a halt in front of the alley the TARDIS was parked in. “We want to make sure you
really know what you’re getting into, if you come onto the TARDIS with us.”

Donna snorted. “Listen to the two of you, making it sound like it’s some sort of surprise that you
spend half your days running into danger.” She put her hands on her hips and looked at both of
them. “The day I met you, I nearly got eaten by a giant spider. Earlier tonight, I was dangling over
London by a cable. I think I understand the danger.”

The Doctor’s relief matched Rose’s. They wanted Donna to come with them, but not uninformed.

“There we are, then,” he said. “Okay.”

Donna looked at him, a hopeful smile spreading across her face. “I can come?”

“Oh yeah.” Rose grinned and nudged the Doctor with her shoulder. “Keep me company, so I’m not
alone with this one all day.”

“Oi!” he protested as they started down the alley.

“No way!” Donna breathed.
Rose looked over her shoulder and realised Donna was pointing at the blue sedan she had noticed when they’d left the TARDIS hours ago. “That’s my car!” She grinned madly. “That is like destiny. And I’ve been ready for this,” she added as she opened the boot.

Rose laughed when she saw the suitcases. “You definitely have,” she agreed as she stepped forward and grabbed one in each hand, then went to unlock the TARDIS and watch Donna unload her trunk into the stunned Doctor’s arms.

“I packed ages ago, just in case,” Donna rambled. “Because I thought, hot weather, cold weather, no weather. He goes anywhere. I’ve gotta be prepared.” Donna pulled out a leather duffle bag and dropped it in the Doctor’s arms, then piled another bag on top of that, and perched a hatbox on top of that.

“Yes, a hatbox,” he stammered, looking at it.

“Planet of the Hats, I’m ready,” Donna said, making Rose laugh yet again as she opened the door. “I don’t need injections, do I?” she asked as she carried two bags into the console room. “You know, like when you go to Cambodia. Is there any of that? Because my friend Veena went to Bahrain, and she—”

“No shots, Donna,” the Doctor interrupted. “The TARDIS takes care of all that. Well, travelling in the TARDIS alone boosts your immune system, and anything she can’t handle, I can take care of in the med bay.”

Donna nodded, then patted down her pockets. “Just let me… Oh!” She reached into her pocket and pulled out car keys. “I almost travelled through space and time with my mum’s car keys. Oh, I’d never have heard the end of that.” She pushed the door open and ran down the alley, shouting, “I won’t be a minute,” over her shoulder as she ran.

Rose laughed at the befuddled look on the Doctor’s face after Donna ran off. “She’s a force of nature, isn’t she?”

He tugged on his ear. “You know, I honestly think she was ready to steamroll her way onboard.”

“Nah,” Rose said as she leaned against the console. “You heard her earlier, how hesitant she was. I don’t blame her for not wanting to let the opportunity go by, or for being prepared.” She winked at the Doctor. “If you hadn’t come back for me, you can bet I would have been watching every street corner for a blue box.”

The Doctor laughed, then grabbed her hand and twirled her around the console once before kissing her. “I’m pretty sure that if you’d wished hard enough, the TARDIS would have heard you and come back to get you. She knew, after all.”

Rose nodded and stepped closer into his embrace. The way the TARDIS saw time was hard to grasp, but Rose knew enough to know the ship had recognised her as Bad Wolf from the moment she ran through the doors to get away from the Auton Mickey.


“Anyway!!” the Doctor said loudly. “Here it is. The TARDIS. It’s bigger on the inside than it is on the outside.”

Donna shook her head. “Oh, I know that bit.” She frowned and rubbed her hands against her arms.
“Although frankly, you could turn the heating up.”

Rose passed a silent request to the TARDIS while the Doctor stammered out his next question for their new companion.

“So, whole wide universe, where do you want to go?” He moved to the navigation panel and looked up at her.

Donna’s smile was soft. “Oh, I know exactly the place.”

“Which is?”

“Two and a half miles that way,” she answered, tilting her head towards the west.

Rose caught on right away. “Someone you want to wave goodbye to?”

Donna nodded. “My gramps.”

Wilfred Mott threw out the last of his coffee with a sigh. He’d hoped Donna would join him again tonight, but she hadn’t been home yet when he’d trekked up the hill to watch the stars. Sylvia had muttered all manner of things under her breath as she’d gotten ready to go out, and nothing he’d said could calm her down.

If Donna wasn’t drifting, if she was waiting like she said she was, then he hoped she wouldn’t have to wait much longer. She deserved better than being treated like a second-class citizen by her own mother.

Wilf thought about the blue box Donna had mentioned as he glanced back up at the sky. A second later, his jaw dropped. He would have thought he’d conjured it from his imagination, except this was nothing like what he’d pictured when Donna had told him her story.

Where is Donna?

“There!” He pointed at the sky, then turned in one spot, his arms flailing as he tried to get Donna’s attention, even though she wasn’t anywhere close by. “Donna, it’s—it’s the flying blue box!”

Luckily, he hadn’t taken his telescope down yet, and he quickly bent over so he could peer through the eyepiece. A second later, he reared back in shock. “What?” he mumbled, then quickly looked again. “That’s Donna,” he cried. “Yeah, that’s Donna.”

His Donna in the blue box, just like she’d said.

Then a blonde woman appeared in the doorway next to Donna, and Wilf squinted. She seemed familiar… when had he seen her? A moment later, a tall bloke joined the women, and Wilf gasped.

“And that’s him,” he mumbled. The shock passed quickly, and he straightened up and pulled his hat off, clutching it as he jumped in the air. “That’s them. Hey, that’s them!”

Oh, he’d known that couple he’d talked to at the newsstand on Christmas Eve had something to do with the Titanic! And here they were, in a spaceship! With Donna! That was as good as proof.

Wilf laughed giddily at the thought as the blue box suddenly shot straight up, disappearing into the stars. If Donna was with that couple, she was in for the adventure of a lifetime.
Chapter End Notes

Welcome to the TARDIS, Donna Noble!

There will be a short chapter on Friday, showing how things are going in Pete's World.
Chapter Notes

This is a short extra chapter, giving a little insight into how things are going for Mickey as he goes dimension hopping. We’ll be back to regular Tuesday updates next week.

Chapter Four: Walking Through Worlds

Mickey took the dimension cannon from Dr. Malcolm Taylor. “You’re sure you’ve got the telemetry fixed?” he asked. “I’m not going to end up in that universe where the Nazis won the war again, am I?”

Developing the dimension cannon had been remarkably easy. The walls between the worlds were getting thinner by the day, and they already had the basis of the technology in the old hoppers.

Targeting the cannon on the correct universe had been trickier, and Mickey had done his share of running as he hopped from world to world.

Malcolm beamed and nodded rapidly. “Oh, yes sir!” he insisted. “Once you gave me the phone that belonged to Miss Tyler, it was easy to lock onto the universe that signal originated from. You shouldn’t have any problems landing in the right spot in space.”

Mickey raised an eyebrow. “You’re being cagey, Malcolm,” he said knowingly. “You saying that I might land in the wrong time? Like, I’ll be there, but I won’t find the Doctor or Rose?”

Malcolm’s eyes darted away. “Well, I know you should land close to where the Doctor’s TARDIS is. That’s the signal we’ve homed in on. But that doesn’t mean you’ll be able to find them. I’m afraid that bit is up to you. You are the field agent, aren’t you?”

Jake laughed. “He’s got you there, Mickey,” he said.

Mickey grunted. “All right, fine. You two can laugh all you want, but maybe when you’re done, you could run the controls so I can fire this thing up. I don’t know if you’ve forgotten, but we’ve got a universe to save.”

After that, everyone got down to business. Mickey was suited up in short order, with the control for the dimension cannon strapped to his waist.

“Ready?” Jake asked from the control booth.

Mickey straightened his shoulders and nodded. “Ready.”

A moment later, he felt the now-familiar tingle as the cannon shot him through the Void and into the universe on the other side. His ears popped as he stepped out onto a street he immediately recognised as being in London.

He looked up and sighed. Even in London, he could see more stars than were visible from the darkest places Pete’s World. His brow furrowed momentarily, because he if could see that many stars, it meant he was too early. If the stars weren’t going out here yet, the Doctor and Rose wouldn’t
be ready to help them. One of the few things they knew was that the event making the stars go out originated here, in the prime universe.

The return button rested heavily on his hip, and he considered it for a moment. Then he shook his head. If this was London—his London—he might still learn something of use if he stuck around.

The first thing he did was find a newspaper to check the date. January 10, 2009, he mused. He’d left Torchwood on April 5, 2012. So Malcolm was right, and our universe runs ahead. Unfortunately, that made it almost impossible to guess how far forward he needed to jump to catch the Doctor and Rose at the right time to help them.

A vendor on the street corner was selling chips, and Mickey bought some to eat while he poked around. The greasy, salty food confirmed that this was indeed his own universe—chips in Pete’s World were a sweet treat, dusted with cinnamon sugar. More than once, he’d been grateful Rose hadn’t been stuck there, just because he’d never have heard the end of how horrible it was to do that to chips.

A commotion caught his attention, and Mickey waded through the crowds of people standing along the side of the street. He blinked a few times when he saw little white blobs skipping and hopping down the street. Then he remembered what Malcolm had said about the dimension cannon landing him close to the TARDIS.

That’s right, he remembered. No ordinary days on the TARDIS.

On cue, a spaceship appeared in the atmosphere overhead. If there’s a spaceship… He scanned the rooftops, and finally, at the top of a fan skyscraper, he thought he saw three figures. And there they are. He shook his head and watched with the crowd, wincing when one woman was dropped by the tractor beam.

After the spaceship left the atmosphere, the streets of London filled up with people celebrating. Mickey threw away the remnants of his chips and watched. It was tempting to use the dimension cannon to track down the TARDIS. It was a time machine, right? So couldn’t the Doctor just… jump ahead to the right time, take care of the entire bloody universe, and then go back to travelling?

But the cannon team had explained to him that it didn’t work that way, and though he didn’t understand temporal mechanics, he trusted the people who did.

His hour was almost over when someone tapped him on the shoulder. Mickey turned around to look at a ginger woman.

The woman smiled at him. “Listen, there is this woman that’s going to come along. A tall blonde woman called Sylvia. Tell her that bin there, all right?” she said, pointing to a bin on the corner. “It’ll all make sense. That bin there.”

The woman took off without waiting for a response, which was too bad, because the dimension cannon beeped, and Mickey knew it was about to pull him home. He shook his head and walked away from the crowd, hoping he could get to the nearby alley before the cannon worked.

Going back to Pete’s World always felt a little bit like being pressed through an opening a tiny bit too small. Mickey wasn’t sure—he’d have to ask the Doctor—but he suspected it was because he didn’t actually belong in that universe. Hopping back to his original universe was the only time he’d gone through the Void without coming out feeling like he’d been compressed two sizes.

“Well?” Jake said as soon as he shook the feeling off.
“We finally found the right universe, and the Doctor,” Mickey said, “but we’re a few months early for them, at least. They still have stars.”

In the control booth, Malcolm sighed loudly. “I miss the stars.”

Jake nodded. “Then we’ll keep trying until we get the timing right.”
The Doctor grinned at Donna as he stepped back from the console. “Well, we gave your granddad a show he won’t soon forget.”

Donna laughed. “No, and you can bet he’ll be asking me about it when I get home.”

It was on the tip of his tongue to ask where she wanted to go next, but then he spotted the shadows under her eyes and Rose’s constant reminders that their human companions needed more sleep finally sank in. The TARDIS hummed, and he nodded in agreement.

“The TARDIS has a room for you if you’re ready for bed, or we can give you a quick tour first,” he offered.

Donna’s eyes sparkled, and he knew what she was going to say. “Are you kidding me? My first night on an alien spaceship, and you think I can just go to bed? Come on; show me the place!”

The Doctor chuckled at her enthusiasm. “Right this way, Donna Noble,” he said, gesturing grandly towards the corridor behind him.

Rose brushed a kiss over his cheek. “I’ll go scrounge up something for supper,” she said. “Bring her to the galley when you’re done with the tour.”

“Right, so it’s bigger on the inside,” Donna said as they started down the corridor, following Rose who took the first left towards the galley. “And you’ve got a kitchen, apparently. I guess aliens who travel in time and space still need to eat.”

“Well, we gave your granddad a show he won’t soon forget.”

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“Yes,” the Doctor agreed, popping the p.

He hesitated at an intersection, then went left. If he ended the tour with Donna’s room, he could show her how to get to the galley from there, ensuring she could find her way back.

“We’ve got pretty much anything you’d want, really,” he told her. “Swimming pool, wardrobe room… snooker room…”

“Snooker?” Donna snorted. “You sound like someone out of a Victorian novel now.” They reached a door, and she put her hand on it. “What’s in here?”

“Open it,” he invited.

She stepped into the room, and the Doctor grinned a little when her jaw dropped. “You’ve got a library,” she said, turning in a circle so she could take in the walls covered in books. “With a fireplace, and one of those fancy ladders that are attached to the shelves.” She picked up a book and flipped through it. “Have you read all of these books?”
The Doctor shook his head. “Most of them, though,” he added. “Come on, the media room is next.”

He made sure to show her all the main rooms companions tended to enjoy, leaving several ready for her to find when she went exploring.

Finally, he stopped in front of another door. “Are you ready for this?” he asked, nodding at it.

Donna bit her lip, then pushed it open and walked into her bedroom. “Oh, I love it!” she said, running her fingers over the dark red wall by the bed. “I always wanted to do an accent wall, but Mum gave me this long speech about how it’s not practical.”

She reached for the gauzy gold curtain floating down from the post of the four poster bed, then froze and looked at the Doctor. “But hang on, you said earlier that she was making me a room. Do you mean this room didn’t even exist a few hours ago?”

The Doctor shook his head. “The TARDIS is sentient,” he explained, finally remembering this was an important fact humans liked to know. “She knew you needed a room so she made it for you.”

“Well, she must have read my mind, because this is exactly what I would have picked out for myself.”

He didn’t know how he gave himself away, but a minute later, Donna narrowed her eyes. “Can she read my mind?”

“Only very surface level,” he said hurriedly. “Nothing major, I promise.”

He watched anxiously as Donna rolled that idea around in her head before nodding. “All right.” Her stomach growled. “Now I don’t know about you, but I’m starving. I haven’t eaten all day.”

The next morning after breakfast, they gathered in the console room. “What would you like for your first trip, Donna?” Rose asked. “Time, or space?”

Donna sat on the jump seat and swung her legs, looking a little overwhelmed. “Your ship can go literally anywhere in the universe, right?”

“Yes!” The Doctor patted the console. “Well, barring a few places that are just completely inaccessible.”

She shook her head. “I can’t even wrap my mind around it.” She took a deep breath. “But I know what I want. Ancient Rome.”

Rose pushed off from the strut she was leaning against to help the Doctor send the TARDIS into flight. “Been a while since we went to Rome, Doctor,” she commented as they worked in tandem.

He looked up at her as he set the coordinates. “Four years. Hopefully this trip will be a little less… eventful than that one.”

“Why?” Donna crossed her arms over her chest. “What happened the last time you went to Rome?”

The Doctor threw the dematerialisation lever. “Oh, nothing much,” he said, but the way he tugged on his ear gave him away. “You know… found a GENIE, got turned into statues, that sort of thing.”

“You were turned into statues?” Donna looked them up and down.
“We got better!” the Doctor protested, his voice going squeaky.

The TARDIS shook a bit as they went through some turbulence, and Rose adjusted the controls to compensate. Despite her efforts, they still took a hard landing, nearly throwing them all to the ground.

Rose was the first to steady herself, and she jogged down the ramp. “Come on then,” she said, gesturing to the door. “Are you ready for this, Donna?”

Donna shook her head, but hopped off the seat. “I suppose, but I’m not keen on getting turned into a garden ornament.”

“Nah,” the Doctor said as he pushed open the door. “The same thing won’t happen twice.”

There was a curtain draped in front of them, and he pushed it out of the way, revealing a sunny street lined with brick buildings and market stalls. “Ancient Rome,” the Doctor proclaimed. Rose slid her hand into his, and they walked out into the crowd. “Well, not for them, obviously,” he continued as they walked. “To all intents and purposes, right now, this is brand new Rome.”

“Oh, my God. It’s, it’s so Roman.” She turned in a circle, then looked back at them. “This is fantastic.” She darted forward and hugged Rose first, then the Doctor, drawing a warm chuckle from him.

Livestock wandered the streets along with humans, and hay was scattered over the flagstones. The resulting aroma was a pungent combination of barnyard and human sweat, but it didn’t seem to have any effect on Donna’s excitement. She kept rambling as they walked, and Rose grinned at her as she tried to wrap her mind around where they were.

“I’m here, in Rome,” she exclaimed, pointing at the stone street for emphasis. “Donna Noble, in Rome. This is just weird. I mean, everyone here’s dead.”

Rose laughed. “Not yet, they aren’t.”

Donna tilted her head and the skin around her mouth tightened. “Hold on a minute,” she said, pointing at something behind Rose and the Doctor. “That sign over there’s in English.”

They followed where she was pointing and spotted a hand-painted sign on a wooden cart that said “Two amphorae for the price of one.”

“Are you having me on?” Donna demanded, a disappointed frown on her face. “Are we in Epcot?”

Rose dropped the Doctor’s hand and wrapped an arm around Donna’s shoulders. “Nah, the TARDIS is translating for you,” she explained. “She’s telepathic, the TARDIS, and she makes foreign languages look and sound like English.”

Donna raised an eyebrow, and Rose winked and crossed her heart. “I swear. You’re talking in Latin right now.”

“Seriously?” She looked over at the Doctor, who grinned and nodded. An answering smile spread across Donna’s face. “I just said ‘seriously’ in Latin.”

“Oh, yeah,” the Doctor said as they started walking again.

“What if I said something in actual Latin—like veni, vidi, vici?” Donna asked as they walked past a stall selling baskets. “My dad said that when he came back from football. If I said veni, vidi, vici to
that lot, what would it sound like?”

They climbed a few stairs to the next street, shadier than the last as the cloths hanging between the buildings kept the sun from reaching the ground. Donna beamed at them while she waited for an answer to her question.

Rose started giggling at the Doctor’s consternation, and she watched him try to work out an answer to Donna’s question.

“I’m not sure,” he admitted after some consideration. “You have to think of difficult questions, don’t you?”

Donna tapped his arm. “I’m going to try it,” she said gleefully, before approaching a fruit seller wearing a brown apron over a loose tunic.

“Afternoon, sweetheart,” the Roman man said. “What can I get you, my love?”

Donna rocked back and forth on the balls of her feet, excitement pouring off her. “Um, _veni, vidi, vici._”

In the back of her mind, Rose’s connection to the TARDIS twinkled with amusement, and she bit back her own laughter as she waited to see what practical joke the ship was planning for their new companion and the Roman man.

The man blinked, then shook his head. “Huh? Sorry? Me no speak Celtic,” he said slowly, enunciating every word. “No can do, missy.”

Rose’s amusement broke out in gales of laughter. “Oh, Donna!” she said when their friend rejoined them. “Thanks for that.”

_And thank you, dear,_ she added. The ship’s sly sense of humour never failed to make her laugh.

“How’s he mean, Celtic?” Donna asked.

“The TARDIS is having a bit of fun,” Rose explained. “She decided to make Latin sound like…”

“Welsh,” the Doctor finished when she looked at him. “You sound Welsh.” His eyes sparkled, and Rose suspected he would be using as many Latin phrases as possible while they were in Rome.

They wandered away from the main market area, no real destination in mind. The warm Italian weather felt good after the last few days in the English winter, and Rose tilted her face back, basking in the sun.

“Don’t our clothes look a bit odd?” Donna asked, gesturing at her loose, tunic-like top and jeans.

Rose sighed and looked at people in togas milling around, going from one stall to another. The women all wore the traditional stolla, with a palla covering their hair. “That’s a fair question,” she told the Doctor. “Should we go back to the wardrobe room and change?”

“Nah,” the Doctor told her. “Ancient Rome, anything goes. It’s like Soho, but bigger.”

Donna raised an eyebrow. “You figured that out when you were statues?”

He scoffed. “That’s not the only time I’ve visited Rome.” He held up his hands. “Before you ask, that fire had nothing to do with me.” He tugged on his ear. “Well, a little bit.”
Rose chuckled and nudged him with her elbow. *More than a little bit, I suspect,* she teased, and watched the tips of his ears turn red.

“But I haven’t got the chance to look around properly,” he said hurriedly. “Coliseum, Pantheon, Circus Maximus. You’d expect them to be looming by now. Where is everything?” they went through an opening in a stone wall and the Doctor stopped and looked at the new street before striding forward. “Try this way.”

They walked went around a corner and walked down another street that opened out onto a large piazza. The buildings here were made of brick, not rough hewn stone, and were obviously more expensive and important.

Rose turned in a circle, trying to get a feel for where they were. She’d run through Rome once, and this just didn’t feel quite right.

Donna found the answer first. “Not an expert,” she said, “but there’s seven hills of Rome, aren’t there? How come they’ve only got one?”

Rose and the Doctor looked up at the mountain Donna had spotted, looming over the city. And it was definitely a mountain—this was no hill. As they watched, the ground rumbled beneath their feet and a plume of smoke rose from the mountain peak.

“Here we go again,” said a vendor behind them as pottery shattered on the brick street.

“Wait a minute,” Donna said. “One mountain, with smoke. Which makes this—”

“Pompeii,” the Doctor and Rose said in unison. They both reached out with their time senses, and Rose gasped when she realised what the date was.

“We’re in Pompeii,” the Doctor confirmed. “And it’s volcano day.” He spun on his heel and raced back for the TARDIS, darting around a corner and nearly toppling over a stack of baskets in his haste to get to his ship.

“Come on,” Rose called to Donna, then took off after him, trusting she would follow.

*I don’t understand,* Doctor, she said as they ran through the streets of Pompeii. A chicken squawked and flew in her face, and Rose waved her arms at it to get it away. *We should have felt the fixed point as soon as we landed, but even now that I know where we are, I still don’t feel that prickly feeling under my skin.*

*I know,* he said curtly. *If I’d felt it, we would have left right away. But this is still Pompeii, and that is still Vesuvius, and we have got to get out of here before it’s too late.*

They reached the street where they’d started, and the Doctor ripped back the curtain hanging over the alcove they’d parked the TARDIS in.

It wasn’t there. They could see straight back to the opposite wall, lined with shelves full of pottery.

The Doctor took a few deep breaths. Oh, this was bad. This was… Rose tried to use their bond to calm him, but everything he knew about Pompeii whirled through his brain. The strength with which the mountain would erupt. The number of deaths. The way the city was buried for centuries, forgotten but for the references of Pliny the Younger.

And they were stuck here without a way out.
“You’re kidding,” Donna muttered when she reached them a second later. “You’re not telling me the TARDIS has gone.”

“Okay,” he mumbled, vaguely aware that Rose had left his side.

“Where is it then?” asked Donna.

He frowned and looked over at her. “You told me not to tell you,” he said, realising as the words left his mouth that she probably hadn’t meant that literally.

Donna rolled her eyes and shook her head. “Oi. Don’t get clever in Latin.”

Rose reappeared behind Donna, and the grim look on her face didn’t make the Doctor feel any better. “The vendor sold it,” she told him.

The Doctor looked at the man Donna had spoken to earlier, peering suspiciously at them over Rose’s shoulder. “But it wasn’t yours to sell,” he sputtered.

“It was on my patch, weren’t it?” He put his hands on his hips and grinned proudly. “I got fifteen sesterces for it. Lovely jubbly.”

The Doctor raked his hand through his hair. No point arguing ownership—they just needed to get the TARDIS back and leave. “Who’d you sell it to?” he asked.

“Old Caecilius.” The vendor rolled his eyes, clearly losing patience with them. “Look, if you want to argue, why don’t you take it out with him? He’s on Foss Street.” He pointed. “Big villa. Can’t miss it.”

“Thanks.” The Doctor nodded sharply and they ran off in the direction he’d pointed. They’d only gone a few steps when the Doctor turned back around, nearly twisting his ankle when he caught a piece of uneven pavement. He regained his balance and leapt across the street to the fruit stand. “What’d he buy a big blue wooden box for?”

“Well I don’t know! He said something about modern art.” The man sighed; he clearly hadn’t expected this much difficulty for his fifteen sesterces. “Foss Street is that way, eighth street down. Turn left, you’ll find Caecilius.”

Rose had waited for him while he got directions, but Donna hadn’t. The Doctor shook his head. “Next time we think about asking someone to travel with us,” he muttered as they ran through Pompeii, looking for their companion, “we’re going to ask first if they know what, ‘Don’t wander off,’ means.”

The ground rumbled again, and they stopped in the middle of the street to brace themselves. We have less than twenty-four hours to get out of here, the Doctor told Rose.

“We’ll make it, love,” Rose promised. The rumbling stopped, and they took off again.

“There’s Foss Street,” Rose pointed out as they ran. “As soon as we find Donna, we’ll come back, get this Caecilius bloke to give us the TARDIS back, and we’ll get out of here. All right?”

The Doctor nodded, then sped up when Donna appeared at the next corner.

“Ha,” he said when he ran into her. “I’ve got it. Foss Street’s this way.”

Donna shook her head, her long, red ponytail whipping back and forth. “No. Well, I found this big
sort of amphitheatre thing. We can start there. We can gather everyone together. Maybe they’ve got a
great big bell or something we could ring. Have they invented bells yet?”

“What do you want a bell for?”

Rose rubbed at her forehead. She knew why Donna wanted a bell, and she knew this explanation
wouldn’t go over well, on either end.

“To warn everyone,” Donna said. “Start the evacuation. What time does Vesuvius erupt? When’s it
due?”

The Doctor pitched his voice low, so the surrounding locals couldn’t overhear their conversation.
“It’s 79AD, twenty-third of August, which makes volcano day tomorrow.”

Donna grinned brightly. “Plenty of time. We could get everyone out easy.”

The Doctor was wound tight, and Rose could feel his anxiety itching to burst out. She put a hand on
his arm, then took a step towards Donna. “Donna, we can’t.”

Their friend blinked and looked at her. “What do you mean, you can’t? That’s what you
do.”

“Usually,” Rose agreed, while the Doctor paced beside her, raking his hands through his hair. “But
Pompeii is a fixed point in time. We can’t change what happens here.”

Donna crossed her arms over her chest and rested her weight on one leg. “Well, why not?” she
challenged, her eyes flashing.

Rose sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose for a moment while she thought of a way to explain
fixed points. “Okay, let’s say time is a building,” she said, speaking quickly so she could get the
explanation out before the building stress and fear erupted out of the Doctor. “As a time traveller,
you can change some things—redecorate a bit, maybe add a window in this wall if you’re careful.
But there are are some things—some events—that are more like load-bearing walls. They’re the
pillars that hold up the rest of history. And if you remove them, the entire thing will collapse.”

“Exactly!” the Doctor broke in. “What happens here, happens. We can’t do anything to change it.
And we have got to get the TARDIS and get out.” He grabbed Rose’s hand and they ran towards
Foss Street.

Rose looked over her shoulder as they ran and was relieved that Donna was following them. She
hadn’t been sure if her explanation would get through to the stubborn woman, but maybe it had
made enough sense to persuade her.

Another tremor shook Pompeii as they reached Foss Street, and the vibrations rattled the walls
enough to let the door to Caecilius’ villa swing open.

“Come on,” the Doctor muttered and darted inside. In the vestibulum, a marble bust shook in its
niche and nearly fell to the floor. “Whoa!” The Doctor caught it and put it back in place. He patted
the sculpture’s cheeks as he steadied it, then put his hands behind his back. “There you go.”

A tall man with deep-set eyes nodded slowly. “Thank you, kind sir. I’m afraid business is closed for
the day. I’m expecting a visitor.”

“But that’s me,” the Doctor said quickly. “I’m a visitor. Hello.” He grabbed the man’s hand and
shook it, then moved into the atrium, making it harder to be shoved back out the door.
“Who are you?” the man—Caecilius, the Doctor assumed—queried.

“I am…” The Doctor floundered for a proper Latin name, then said the first thing that came to mind. “Spartacus.”

Rose took his hand. “Which makes me Mrs. Spartacus,” she added.

“I’m Spartacus, too,” Donna chimed in as she moved to stand on his other side.

The Doctor tugged on his ear. “No relation. It’s a very common last name where we’re from.”

Caecilius didn’t appear interested in their unique naming convention, though. “I’m sorry, but I’m not open for trade,” he insisted.

Rose cocked her head; she could hear the TARDIS, just out of sight. While the Doctor learned of Caecilius’ work in marble, she slipped around the man and offered a charming smile to the red-headed woman and young man sitting by the pool in the middle of the atrium. They blinked in confusion, but didn’t stop her as she walked quickly to the blue box in the corner near a potted tree.

_Oh, am I glad to see you_, she told the ship as she reached for her key.

But instead of a welcoming hum, the TARDIS’ song changed to a warning buzz. Rose dropped her hand and stepped back from the box. Apparently, they weren’t supposed to go anywhere just yet. She sighed and turned around, just as the Doctor pushed past Caecilius claiming to be a marble inspector.

“Oh, am I glad to see you,” she told the ship as she reached for her key.

“But instead of a welcoming hum, the TARDIS’ song changed to a warning buzz. Rose dropped her hand and stepped back from the box. Apparently, they weren’t supposed to go anywhere just yet. She sighed and turned around, just as the Doctor pushed past Caecilius claiming to be a marble inspector.

“By the gods of commerce, an inspection,” moaned the woman Rose had noticed a moment ago. “I’m sorry, sir. I do apologise for my son.” Caecilius’ wife took the young man’s goblet and poured it into the shallow pool, earning an outraged protest from the lad.

“And this is my good wife, Metella.” Caecilius stammered a bit in his introductions. He knotted his hands together anxiously. “I—I must confess, we’re not prepared for a…”

The Doctor shook his head quickly. “Nothing to worry about. I’m, I’m sure you’ve nothing to hide.” He pointed at the TARDIS and raised an eyebrow at Rose, who was leaning against a nearby column. “Although, frankly, that object looks rather like wood to me.”

“I told you to get rid of it,” Metella griped to Caecilius as the Doctor strode past her.

The Doctor pressed his hand to the door, then pulled back with a hiss when she shocked him.

Rose nodded. _She wouldn’t let me in._

“I only bought it today,” Caecilius explained quickly.

The Doctor stuck his hands in his coat pockets and rocked back on his heels. “Ah, well. Caveat emptor,” he said, impishly choosing the Latin for “Buyer beware,” knowing the TARDIS would render it as Welsh.

“Oh, you’re Celtic,” Caecilius said, nonplussed. “There’s lovely.”

The Doctor rapped lightly on the door then turned away from his rebellious ship. “I’m sure it’s fine, but I might have to take it off your hands for a proper inspection.”

Donna tossed her ponytail over her shoulder and looked at the Doctor and Rose. “Although while we’re here, wouldn’t you recommend a holiday, Mr. and Mrs. Spartacus?” she asked.
The Doctor stiffened, but Rose’s anger was even stronger than his frustration, so he kept quiet and let her talk.

“Why would we do that, Spartacus?” she asked, a sharp edge of warning in her voice.

Donna lifted her chin and pointed at the family. “Oh, this lovely family. Mother and father and son. Don’t you think they should get out of town?”

The Doctor looked at the floor and rubbed at his eyebrow. Rose had explained, far better than he would have done, and Donna was still insisting… He pressed his lips together to hold in a sigh—did she really think he didn’t want to help these people?

“Why should we do that?” Caecilius asked, sounding bewildered and wary.

Donna rolled her eyes as she turned to them. “Well, the volcano, for starters.”

“Donna, don’t,” Rose growled, while Caecilius just asked, “What?”

“Volcano,” Donna repeated incredulously.

“What ano?” Caecilius questioned, a deep furrow in the middle of his forehead.

Donna pointed over her shoulder with her thumb in the vague direction of Vesuvius. “That great big volcano right on your doorstep.”

The Doctor grabbed her by the shoulders and gently shoved her off towards the shrine on the side of the room, with Rose right behind them. “Oh, Spartacus, for shame. We haven’t even greeted the household gods yet.” He dropped his voice to a whisper as they walked through the sheer curtains into the small cubiculum housing the shrine. “They don’t know what it is. Vesuvius is just a mountain to them. The top hasn’t blown off yet. The Romans haven’t even got a word for volcano,” he told her as he sprinkled water over the gods. “Not until tomorrow.”

“Oh, great,” she said sarcastically. “They can learn a new word as they die.”

“Donna, stop it.”

That order, pitched in a low, hoarse voice, came from Rose. The Doctor and Donna both turned to stare at her, him in surprise and her in anger.

“Listen, Blondie,” Donna hissed, “I don’t know what things are typically like in your blue box, but you’re not telling me to shut up. That boy”—She jerked her thumb over her shoulder at the family—“how old is he, sixteen? And tomorrow he burns to death.”

Helplessness welled up inside the Doctor. “That’s not my fault,” he argued. He’d meddled slightly with a fixed point before, and while he would never regret saving Charley, there had definitely been repercussions.

“It’s your fault right now, if you won’t save him,” Donna insisted.

No. No, Doctor, it’s not your fault, Rose told him firmly.

The Doctor took a deep breath and tried to find the words to explain—since clearly, Donna hadn’t accepted Rose’s explanation—but before he thought of any, a herald called out, “Announcing Lucius Petrus Dextrus, Chief Augur of the City Government.”

Everyone in the villa turned towards the door. A portly man with a cloak draped over his upper body
stepped into the atrium, then paused, framed by the doorway, while he waited for them to pay him appropriate homage.

“Lucius.” Caecilius hurried to greet him. “My pleasure, as always.”

“Quintus, stand up,” Metella ordered, and the young man reluctantly got to his feet.

“A rare and great honour, sir, for you to come to my house.” Caecilius held out his hand, but Lucius ignored it.

The Doctor raised his eyebrow. It looked like a snub, but somehow, he got the feeling there was more to Lucius’ refusal to shake hands than simply a desire to remind the marble worker of his place.

“The birds are flying north,” Lucius said pretentiously, “and the wind is in the west.”

Caecilius only hesitated for a moment before nodding. “Quite absolutely. That’s good, is it?”

“Only the grain of wheat knows where it will grow.”

The Doctor raised an eyebrow. It had been a long time since he’d heard such ridiculous obfuscation portrayed as prophecy.

But Caecilius was obviously impressed, even though he had no clue what the soothsayer’s words could mean. “There now, Metella,” he murmured, drawing his wife to his side. “Have you ever heard such wisdom?”

“Never,” she agreed, then stepped closer to the augur, holding out her hands in welcome. When Lucius merely looked at her hands, she turned the gesture into a genuflection. “It’s an honour,” she said obsequiously.

“Pardon me, sir. I have guests,” Caecilius said, pointing the the Doctor, Rose and Donna. “This is Spartacus, Spartacus and, er, Spartacus.”

“A name is but a cloud upon a summer wind.”

The Doctor blinked. Not that their aliases were particularly clever this time around, but they weren’t usually sussed out so quickly. “But the wind is felt most keenly in the dark,” he returned, wondering if Lucius would grasp his meaning that he, at least, did not have a name to give.

“Ah.” Lucius took a few steps towards them. “But what is the dark, other than an omen of the sun?”

In other words, you once had a name and have chosen to let it go.

“I concede that every sun must set.” Yes, I did have a name once.

“Ha,” Lucius crowed.

The Doctor nodded, but didn’t stop. “And yet the son of the father must also rise,” he concluded, neatly turning the conversation away from himself.


“Oh, yes. But don’t mind me. Don’t want to disturb the status quo.”

“He’s Celtic,” Caecilius whispered.
“We’ll be off in a minute,” the Doctor added, pointing at the TARDIS.

“I’m not going,” Donna muttered when he tried to push her towards the ship.

“You’ve got to,” he told her, _sotto voce._

“Well, I’m not,” she retorted.

*What difference will it make, if the TARDIS won’t let us in?* Rose asked as they slowly made their way across the atrium.

*Oh, she’ll let us in,* the Doctor promised darkly. *Because we can’t stay here, and she knows it.*

“The moment of revelation. And here it is.”

The excitement in Caecilius’ voice drew the Doctor’s attention, and he paused to look over his shoulder when they were a few feet away from the TARDIS. The marble worker pulled a velvet cloth off a marble tile, and the Doctor stopped in his tracks.

_Doctor? What is it?*_ Rose asked.

Caecilius, unaware of his rapt audience, continued speaking just to Lucius. “Exactly as you specified. It pleases you, sir?”

He nodded at the black marble tile and the rows of parallel lines etched into it in white. *Does that look familiar to you?*

Lucius smirked at the tile. “As the rain pleases the soil.”

Rose recognised it right away. *This is why the TARDIS brought us here, isn’t it?* she asked. *And why she won’t let us leave. Something’s wrong.*

*It might also be the reason why we can’t feel the fixed point,* the Doctor agreed.

“Oh, now that’s different,” the Doctor said as he walked back towards the locals. “Who designed that, then?”

Caecilius nodded at Lucius. “My Lord Lucius was very specific.”

“Where’d you get the pattern?” Rose asked.

Lucius looked back at them, obviously displeased to be questioned. “On the rain and mist and wind.”

“But that looks like a circuit,” Donna told the Doctor and Rose.

“Made of stone,” the Doctor agreed quietly.

She took a step towards the circuit. “Do you mean you just dreamt that thing up?”

The Doctor winced at the incredulity in Donna’s voice. It was a fair question, and one he’d like the answer to himself, but it was a touchy subject in a time and place where prophecy was the order of the day.

“That is my job, as City Augur,” Lucius snapped.

Donna snorted softly. “What’s that, then, like the mayor?”
“Oh, ha,” the Doctor said quickly, anxious to repair the damage Donna’s careless words had done. “You must excuse my friend, she’s from… Barcelona.” He turned to Donna and lowered his voice. “No, but this is an age of superstition. Of official superstition. The Augur is paid by the city to tell the future. The wind will blow from the west? That’s the equivalent of the ten o’clock news.”

“They’re laughing at us.”

That was a new voice, and everyone looked over at the young woman, looking pale and drawn in a yellow dress with her hair loose around her shoulders.

She nodded at the Doctor, Rose and Donna as she shuffled into the room. “Those ones, they use words like tricksters. They’re mocking us.”

The Doctor held a hand up. “No, no, I’m not,” he refuted quickly. “I meant no offence.”

But Metella was apparently more concerned that her children would offend, than the other way around. “I’m sorry,” she said breathlessly, walking quickly to the girl’s side. “My daughter’s been consuming the vapours.”

Quintus stared at his sister, for the first time showing something more than teenage impudence. “By the gods, Mother. What have you been doing to her?”

“No now, Quintus,” Caecilius commanded.

“Yeah, but she’s sick. Just look at her.” Quintus gestured angrily to his sister.

Lucius walked slowly towards mother and daughter. “I gather I have a rival in this household. Another with the gift.”

Metella wrapped an arm around her daughter’s shoulders. “Oh, she’s been promised to the Sibylline Sisterhood,” she said, a note of pride in her voice. “They say she has remarkable visions.”

Lucius sneered. “The prophecies of women are limited and dull. Only the menfolk have the capacity for true perception.”

The Doctor winced and waited for Donna or Rose to jump on that.

“Some things never change,” Rose muttered, while Donna’s retort was a little sharper and a little louder.

“I’ll tell you where the wind’s blowing right now, mate.”

A minor tremor shook the windows, and Lucius looked down his nose at them. “The mountain god marks your words. I’d be careful, if I were you.”

“Consuming the vapours, you say?” the Doctor asked the young woman.

She leaned against her mother. “They give me strength.”

The Doctor shook his head. “It doesn’t look like it to me.”

“Is that your opinion… as a doctor?” she asked, lifting her chin slightly.

Shock rolled through the Doctor and Rose both. “I beg your pardon?” he asked.

“Doctor. That’s your name.” She looked at Rose, her bloodshot eyes wide and unblinking. “And
your favourite flower is the Rose.”

Rose took a step back from the girl. “How did you know that?” She grabbed the Doctor’s hand, and he welcomed the familiar pressure.

Instead of answering Rose, the girl turned to Donna. “And you. You call yourself Noble.”

“Now then, Evelina,” her mother whispered. “Don’t be rude.”

“No, no, no, no,” the Doctor said. “Let her talk.”

Evelina tilted her head, and her eyes went unfocused as she looked at something no one else could see. “You come from so far away.”

“The female soothsayer is inclined to invent all sorts of vagaries,” Lucius scoffed.

“Oh, not this time, Lucius,” the Doctor said, looking back at the man, then at Evelina again. They knew every one of Evelina’s prophecies had been accurate, but it was more than that. She was not simply guessing based on signs, nor was she telepathically pulling information from them. The ripples she created in the timelines was unmistakable.

Evelina could see the future.

The Doctor shook his head slowly. “No, I reckon you’ve been out-soothsayed.”

“Is that so, man from Gallifrey?” Lucius intoned as the ground shook again.

The buzz of curiosity quieted immediately, and the Doctor looked at Lucius. “What?”

Lucius stared at him, looking straight into his eyes when most would look away. “The strangest of images. Your home is lost in fire, is it not?”

“Doctor, what are they doing?” Donna asked.

Lucius looked at her and Rose. “And you, daughters of… London.”

Rose’s hand shook a little in his. “How does he know that?” she asked, the uncertainty sharpening her London accent.

“This is the gift of Pompeii,” Lucius declared, while the volcano rumbled in counterpoint to his words. “Every single oracle tells the truth.”

“That’s impossible,” Donna insisted.

“Doctor, he is returning.”

Rose’s grip on his hand became painfully tight. *Doctor, you promised me he couldn’t come back!*

*He can’t, love. I promise, there’s no way he could possibly come back. Lucius must mean someone else.*

“Who is? Who’s ‘he’?” the Doctor spat out. Despite his reassurances to Rose, the prophecy put him on edge. The Master couldn’t come back, but there were plenty of other people the Doctor would rather never returned.

“And you, daughter of London.” He looked at Rose, and they both tensed. “The wolf will howl
Rose and the Doctor froze for a moment, then Rose straightened and took a step towards him. “How do you know about that?” she asked, her voice low and her body tense.

“Even the word Doctor is false,” Evelina mumbled, drawing their attention back to her. She stepped towards them, her eyes burning with a strange fire. “Your real name is hidden. It burns in the stars, in the Cascade of Medusa herself. You are a Lord, sir. A Lord of Time.”

The Doctor’s mind raced, trying to figure out how these people could possibly know so much about them. Their names, the truth about his home and his hidden name, even knowing about the Medusa Cascade. It was all impossible, and yet he’d heard it with his own ears.

Evelina swayed on her feet, and the Doctor realised a second too late that she was going to faint. The girl turned as she fell and landed on her side instead of face first.
The Courage to Change the Things That Can

Chapter Notes

I should have mentioned last week that Fires of Pompeii has been split into three chapters, instead of two. This one ends with a nice bit of a cliffhanger, and then next week, we'll wrap up the episode.

“Evelina!” Metella rushed forward, but it was Quintus who picked his sister up.

Donna watched as Rose and the Doctor exchanged a look. They seemed more adept at having a silent conversation than most married couples, and given that the Doctor was an alien, she suspected there might be a reason for that. Another thing to ask about, once she made it clear to them that they couldn’t just order her about.

After a moment, Rose turned and put a hand on Donna’s back. “Let’s follow them,” she whispered, rushing after Metella’s retreating figure.

Quintus nodded when he passed them on his way back to the atrium, and Donna was unsurprised when they turned the corner and Evelina was reclining on a chaise lounge in front of a wall covered with a gorgeous blue mosaic.

Metella smiled sadly as she carried a cloth and two bowls to her daughter’s side. “She didn’t mean to be rude. She’s ever such a good girl.” She shrugged. “But when the gods speak through her…”

“What’s wrong with her arm?” Donna asked as Metella unwrapped the bandage covering Evelina’s right forearm.

“An irritation of the skin. She never complains, bless her. We bathe it in olive oil every night.”

“Can we help?” Rose asked.

Donna stared at her. The compassion in her voice now was a far cry from her harsh tone earlier when she’d insisted they leave all these people to their deaths.

Metella looked up at them, her throat working as she visibly tried to control her emotions. “Evelina said you’d come from far away. Please, have you ever seen anything like it?”

Donna took a deep breath and stepped forward, running her fingers over the deep rash. But that’s… She looked at her fingers, then back at Evelina. “It’s stone.”

Rose knelt at the girl’s side and cradled her arm in her hands. “You’re right, Donna,” she murmured.

It was quiet in the room for a moment, the Rose looked up at Metella, her eyes sharp. “You said she breathes in the vapours from the hypocaust?”

Metella nodded. “The sisters say that is where the visions come from, and it must be true, for after she’s inhaled the vapours, she is much more prone to a… an interlude like the one she had this afternoon.”
“And your hypocaust is fed directly from Vesuvius?” Rose pressed.

A furrow appeared in Metella’s forehead. “Does that matter?”

Rose stood up in one smooth motion and smiled, but there was something false in it. “Nah, I’m just trying to get all the information available,” she said.

Metella sighed and brushed a hand over Evelina’s forehead. “Thank you for trying to help. Could I offer you something in return?” She looked at them for a moment, then brightened. “New clothes, perhaps? With a palla to drape over your hair, so you will be properly attired.”

Donna choked. She’d watched enough period dramas to understand what Metella was trying to hint at delicately. “That… that git,” she hissed to Rose, who burst into a fit of giggles. “Like Soho, he said! Not one word about how people would think we were prosties.”

“So, like Soho twenty years ago,” Rose jested.

Metella smiled awkwardly. “Yes, I think new clothes would be just the thing,” she said, then backed out of the room.

As soon as she was gone, Rose turned to Donna and took her by the shoulders. “Donna, you have got to stop talking about Vesuvius and trying to get them all to leave,” she said urgently.

Donna crossed her arms over her chest, and Rose threw her head back and groaned loudly. “Oi, don’t try to play the long-suffering time traveller card with me, Blondie,” Donna snapped. “I told you, owning that blue box doesn’t mean you get to boss me around. I’ll do what I like.” She tossed her hair back over her shoulder. “I don’t understand how you and the Doctor can stand talking to these people, knowing they’re going to die, and not do anything about it. You saved me last year. You saved us all. Why is that different?”

“I thought you understood when I told you earlier,” Rose hissed. “Time around you that Christmas was in flux. Time in Pompeii is fixed. We can’t do anything to change what happens here.”

“How can you tell the difference?” Donna countered. “What gives you the right to say this is fixed, that you can’t help these people?”

Rose pressed her lips together and counted to ten before answering. “That’s how we see the universe, the Doctor especially,” she explained once she had her temper under control. “We can see it all—what is, what was, what could be, what must not. That’s the burden of a Time Lord, Donna. And we’re the only ones left.”

“All right, well, how many people died in this fixed point?” Donna demanded.

The number had been running through the Doctor’s head since they’d realised where they were, and Rose answered automatically. “Twenty thousand.”

Donna arched an eyebrow and rested her weight on one foot. “Is that what you can see, you and the Doctor? All twenty thousand? And you think that’s all right, do you?”

“Of course it isn’t!” Rose exclaimed. “It’s awful! But we know what will happen if we interfere. If we change a fixed point, more than those twenty thousand will die. The entire planet will become unstable as Time tries to compensate for what we’ve done.” She took a deep breath. “I’ve seen it before, what happens when you mess with Time when you shouldn’t. I tried to save my dad’s life, and I nearly destroyed the planet. I’m not going to make that mistake again, not ever.”
Uncertainty crossed Donna’s face, finally. “It could destroy the planet?” she asked, her voice less strident. “You’re not just saying that to get me to stop pushing?”

“I’m not just saying it.” Rose ran her hand through her hair. “You really think that we’d just walk away if we could do something about it?”

Donna’s shoulders lifted in a small, helpless shrug. “I thought it was strange,” she admitted. “But I couldn’t understand what reason you could possibly have. I mean… I know you tried to tell me, but I didn’t really listen.”

Some of Rose’s anger returned when she remembered how difficult Donna had made the last hour for the Doctor. “Do you understand now, or are you just trying to get me to leave it alone?” she asked, her tone demanding honesty.

Donna flinched. “I understand, really.”

Rose nodded. “Good. Then there’s one more thing you need to understand, Donna. Challenge the Doctor. Push him. Ask him questions. It’s why he travels with companions, and it’s a quality I actively look for when I choose who to ask to come with us.”

Her voice hardened. “But I will not tolerate anyone blaming the Doctor for things that aren’t his fault.” The Doctor had his protective streak, and this was hers. “Beneath his arrogance and ego, that man carries more guilt than you can possibly imagine. He’s seen horrible things, and he blames himself for every person he’s been unable to save.”

Donna pursed her lips, and Rose recognised the consideration on her face. “What are you thinking?”

“Well… I understand we can’t save everyone. I don’t like it, but if it’s twenty thousand people tomorrow or the entire planet next week, I do understand. But I wonder. Wouldn’t it make the Doctor feel better if we saved someone?”

“What do you mean?”

Donna started gesticulating as she spoke, her motions getting bigger as she got more excited. “So, Pompeii is a fixed point, but it’s not like there’s a list of the dead. I wasn’t brilliant at history, but I do remember that much. And that means there’s no reason we couldn’t rescue just one family.”

Rose knew the Doctor would argue, but she also knew, deep in her bones, that Donna was right. Not only was it possible to save one family without undoing the fixed point, it was important that they do so. Time might hold the final trump card in Pompeii, but it couldn’t steal their ability to show compassion, unless they allowed it to.

oOoOoOoOo

After Rose and Donna left, the TARDIS let the Doctor in long enough to take his coat off and toss it over a strut. Now that he knew there was a reason they were here, she trusted him not to fly away—especially not without Rose or Donna.

Once he was free of the extra layer, he scanned the atrium, looking for the hypocaust. Pompeians breathed in the vapours and became actual soothsayers, and he had a sudden urge to see what was going on with the Pompeii hypocaust system.

“How do you mind if I have a look?” he asked Caecilius. He pulled the grate off the hypocaust without waiting for an answer. Instead of the fire he expected, a different kind of heat was being pushed up the vent—like the difference between forced air heat and a fireplace.
“Different sort of hypocaust?” he asked.

“Oh, yes,” Caecilius said proudly. “We’re very advanced in Pompeii. In Rome, they’re still using the old wood-burning furnaces, but we’ve got hot springs, leading from Vesuvius itself.”

“Who thought of that?” It was rather brilliant, but not something the Romans had thought of in 79AD.

Caecilius sat down on the opposite side of the vent. “The soothsayers, after the great earthquake, seventeen years ago. An awful lot of damage. But we rebuilt.”

The Doctor looked up from the burning embers. “Didn’t you think of moving away? Oh no, then again, San Francisco,” he said. San Franciscans fled to the East Bay after the 1906 earthquake, but of course that wasn’t actually outside the range of the fault line—a fact that had caused problems more than once.

Caecilius cocked his head. “That’s a new restaurant in Naples, isn’t it?”

A loud roaring and hissing rose up through the duct into the villa. “What’s that noise?” the Doctor shouted.

“Don’t know.” Caecilius’ voice was filled the quiet fear of a man who’d tried not to think about what the noise could be. “Happens all the time. They say the gods of the Underworld are stirring.”

_Doctor, Evelina’s arm is turning to stone._

Pieces started to fall together for the Doctor, and he pulled his head out of the vent and rested on his heels. “But after the earthquake, let me guess,” he asked Caecilius. “Is that when the soothsayers started making sense?”

Caecilius nodded. “Oh, yes, very much so. I mean, they’d always been, shall we say, imprecise?” he whispered, conspiratorially.

The Doctor nodded. That sounded much more like what he recalled of soothsayers and augurs.

“But then the soothsayers, the augurs, the haruspex, all of them, they saw the truth again and again,” Caecilius continued. “It’s quite amazing. They can predict crops and rainfall with absolute precision.”

The Doctor looked down into the steam coming out of the hypocaust. If they could make predictions with such accuracy, why hadn’t they mentioned the volcano? “Haven’t they said anything about tomorrow?” he asked.

“No.” Caecilius shook his head, then fearful realisation crossed his face. “Why, should they? Why do you ask?”

“No, no.” The Doctor shook his head and looked back down at the vent. “No reason. I’m just asking. But the soothsayers, they all consume the vapours, yeah?”

“That’s how they see,” Caecilius confirmed.

The Doctor put his glasses on as more steam and smoke wafted into the house. “_Ipso facto._” He reached into the vent and pulled up a handful of dust. “They’re all consuming this.”

Caecilius looked at it as he let the particles fall back into the hypocaust. “Dust.”

That cast Evelina’s skin condition in a different light. A moment later, the Doctor remembered the way Lucius had refused to shake Caecilius’ hand. But what if he couldn’t, because his arm is stone? He’s been breathing the vapours considerably longer than Evelina. Lucius Petrus Dextrus—Lucius with the stone right arm.

He stood up and wandered away from the hypocaust, leaving Caecilius staring at him in confusion. There was one member of this family who could quite possibly be convinced to help him, even though it would mean going against the augur.

The Doctor found Quintus in one of the smaller cubiculum, draped over a chaise lounge, looking, frankly, completely stoned. “Quintus, me old son,” he chirped. “This Lucius Petrus Dextrus. Where does he live?”

Quintus rolled his eyes and let his head loll back against the arm of the chaise. “It’s nothing to do with me.”

The Doctor snorted softly and walked towards him. “Let me try again. This Lucius Petrus Dextrus.”

He reached behind Quintus’ ear and pulled out a coin, and suddenly, the drunken stupor was gone from the lad’s face. He sat up, and the Doctor stepped back, forcing him to stand up and follow him.

“Where does he live?”

Quintus reached for the coin, then hesitated. “He’s not going to welcome guests,” he warned.

The Doctor stuck his hands into his pockets and bounced on his toes. “I didn’t exactly plan to knock on the front door,” he admitted.

“Oh, no.” Quintus shook his head. “I’m no fan of the augur, but I value my freedom more than that.”

“Oh, come on,” the Doctor wheedled. “A denarius now for taking me there, and two more if I get in and out of the house without difficulty?” He jiggled his hand in his pocket so the money would jingle.

Quintus rolled his eyes and pulled a torch off the wall. “Fine. But if you get caught, it’s not my fault.”

“Course not!”

The Doctor blinked when they stepped outside and it was twilight. Had they really been at Caecilius’ that long already? Quintus took off down a side street and the Doctor followed, taking advantage of the lad’s sullen silence to talk with Rose. She’d been tense for the last few minutes, and he suspected he knew why.

How is Donna doing?

Good, Rose told him immediately. We had a long talk, and I think she actually gets it now.

The Doctor relaxed slightly. He understood where Donna was coming from, so he didn’t blame her for being upset with them. On the other hand, it had hurt to have one of the hardest things they did thrown back in their faces, like they were doing something wrong.

Good.
Rose hesitated, and the Doctor waited for her to tell him what was on her mind. *There is something, though...* she said after a moment. *She understands that we can’t stop the eruption, or get the entire city evacuated, but she thinks we ought to save someone. Just... just this family.*

*We can’t.*

*Why not? Do you know this family in particular dies?*

The Doctor ground his teeth. *We’ll talk later,* he said. *I’m almost to Lucius’ house.*

*Be careful, love.*

It was completely dark by the time they reached the augur’s house. True to his word, Quintus led him right past the door, stopping by a large, ground floor window instead. “Don’t tell my dad,” he muttered, looking over his shoulder.

The Doctor leapt lightly from the ground, to a barrel, to the window sill. “Only if you don’t tell Rose,” he told Quintus as he undid the shutters and crept into the house.

Steam rose from the hypocaust in the middle of the room, but it didn’t provide enough light to see by. He turned around and leaned out the window, gesturing to Quintus.

“Pass me that torch.”

The lad sighed and handed it to him, and with more light, the Doctor quickly spotted something curious on the wall. Quintus joined him a moment later in front a large curtain, and after peering behind it, the Doctor handed the torch back to him and pulled the curtain down.

The entire wall was covered with tiles just like the one Caecilius had given Lucius that evening. The Doctor put his glasses on and studied the marble tile circuits—enough to form a complete picture, he suspected.

“The liar,” Quintus whispered. “He told my father it was the only one.”

“Well, plenty of marble merchants in this town,” the Doctor explained as he scanned the circuit pieces, trying to piece them together. *What is Lucius up to?* “Tell them all the same thing, get all the components from different places, so no one can see what you’re building.”

“Which is what?” asked Quintus

Another voice answered Quintus before the Doctor could. “The future, Doctor,” Lucius declared, and the Doctor and Quintus spun around, caught red-handed. “We are building the future, as dictated by the gods.”

oOoOoOoOo

Evelina regained consciousness just before her mother returned with their borrowed clothing, and the girl watched eagerly as Rose and Donna tried on the clothes and modelled them.

Rose enjoyed the soft texture of the yellow stolla she’d been given, and adjusted the pink palla around her shoulders. It was a little different from what she’d worn the last time they were in Rome, but similar enough that she understood how to drape it properly.

Donna’s outfit was all purple, and the ginger looked absolutely stunning in it. Rose watched as she twirled once, then nearly tripped over the palla, getting a laugh from Evelina.

Evelina’s eyes widened, even as she laughed again. “Oh, that’s sacrilege.”

*Rose.*

The Doctor’s call sounded urgent, so Rose stepped to the side of the room so she could give him her full attention. She absently noticed as she moved that Donna stepped forward and sat down on the bed to talk to Evelina.

*What is it, Doctor?*

*Lucius has a whole wall of those marble circuits.*

Rose felt her forehead crinkle up. The longer they were here, the less she liked what they discovered—and that was outside of the fact that in less than twenty-four hours, the volcano was going to erupt in one of the deadliest events of classical history.

*Be careful,* she urged. *If he’s up to something…*

The Doctor’s guilt doubled. *I… he might have caught me trying to break into his house.*

Rose pressed her hands to her temples and rubbed circles against the pulse points. *Doctor…*  

*Oh, but it’s all right!* he reassured her quickly. *He seems to have a good sense of humour about it. I’m trying to figure out what these circuits are for.*

Rose shook her head; his bubbly excitement was so familiar, and she loved him for it. *All right, Doctor. Let me know if you find out anything new.*

He agreed absently, and she rejoined Donna and Evelina just in time to hear the Pompeian girl ask, “Is tomorrow special?”

“You tell me,” Donna said. “What do you see?”

“Donna, you promised,” Rose hissed.

Donna shook her head. “I know, Rose, but she should be able to see it, shouldn’t she? If their soothsayers all know the truth?”

Rose blinked. “That’s a really good point, actually,” she admitted. “Do you see anything, Evelina?”

Evelina looked confused, but she closed her eyes and did whatever it was she did when she was summoning one of her visions. “The sun will rise, the sun will set.” She opened her eyes and looked at Rose and Donna. “Nothing special at all.”

Rose and Donna exchanged a glance, and after a moment, Rose nodded. Time was doing something very strange in Pompeii—what should have been a deeply uncomfortable fixed point didn’t feel off at all to either her or the Doctor, and now the strangely accurate seer couldn’t see anything tomorrow, when the time travellers all knew the volcano was going to erupt. She had a feeling that getting to the bottom of this was why the TARDIS had brought them to a fixed point in the first place.

After Rose nodded her agreement, Donna took a deep breath. “Look, I’ve got a prophecy too.”
To their surprise, Evelina covered her eyes. The eyes drawn on the backs of her hands were a bit freaky, but Donna didn’t stop.

“Evelina, I’m sorry, but you’ve got to hear me out. Evelina, can you hear me? Listen.”

“There is only one prophecy,” Evelina insisted, her voice muffled by her hands covering her face.

There was something off about the situation, about Evelina’s reaction, but Rose was too curious about why no one in Pompeii knew about the coming eruption to stop Donna.

“All right,” Donna soothed. “Then maybe this is... part of the prophecy. Tomorrow, that mountain is going to explode. Evelina, please listen,” she pleaded when the girl showed no signs of responding.

“The air is going to fill with ash and rocks, tons and tons of it, and this whole town is going to get buried.”

“That’s not true,” Evelina denied emphatically, rocking slightly.

Rose rested a hand on Evelina’s shoulder, and the girl jerked away from her touch. She looked helplessly at Donna, then said, “Evelina... even if you don’t believe us, just tell your family you want to get out of town for the day. It won’t matter if we’re wrong, will it?”

“This is false prophecy.” Evelina finally took her hands away from her face and looked at them, betrayal etched on her face.

oOoOoOoOo

The Doctor let his conversation with Rose drift into the background as he played with the circuit tiles. “Put this one there,” he muttered, adjusting one. Then he took the remaining piece from Quintus and slid it into place. “This one there.” He tilted his head and looked at the next one, then nodded.

“Uh, keep that one upside down, and what’ve you got?” He turned around and waited to see if Lucius would admit he didn’t know what he was doing.

“Enlighten me,” the augur said, looking decidedly less amused than he had before.

“What, the soothsayer doesn’t know?” the Doctor taunted, rocking back and forth from one foot to the other.

Lucius heaved a sigh. “The seed may float on the breeze in any direction.”

“Yeah, I knew you were going to say that,” the Doctor said. He looked back at the finished circuit board. “But it’s an energy converter.”

“An energy converter of what?” Lucius demanded.

“I don’t know.” He turned around and grinned broadly. “Isn’t that brilliant? I love not knowing. Keeps me on my toes.” He jogged over to stand by Lucius, keeping his voice light. “It must be awful being a prophet, waking up every morning, is it raining? Yes, it is, I said so. Takes all the fun out of life. But who designed this, Lucius, hmm?” he asked, finally getting to the point of his rambling. Because there was no way a human from the first century AD could have designed a circuit. “Who gave you these instructions?”

“I think you’ve babbled enough,” Lucius declared hotly.

The Doctor ignored the warning on Lucius’ face. “Lucius, really, tell me. Honestly, I’m on your side. I can help,” he promised.
Anger etched deep lines on Lucius’ face. “You insult the gods. There can be only one sentence.” He turned to his guards. “At arms.”

The guards stepped forward and drew their short swords in one motion, and the Doctor took off his glasses and fell back to stand by the circuit and Quintus. “Oh, morituri te salutant,” he muttered, quoting the pledge combatants in the Coliseum gave the Emperor before fighting to their deaths.

With the upper hand, Lucius’ face returned to its previous, almost placid, expression. “Celtic prayers won’t help you now.”

“But it was him, sir,” Quintus babbled. “He made me do it. Mister Dextrus, please don’t.”

The Doctor shook his head at Quintus. “Come on now, Quintus, dignity in death.” He turned back to Lucius. “I respect your victory, Lucius. Shake on it?” he suggested, holding his hand out. An emotion flickered briefly across the augur’s face, and the Doctor knew his suspicion was correct.

“Come on. Dying man’s wish?”

He lunged forward before Lucius could react and reached under the cloak for his right arm. When he wrapped his fingers around Lucius’ wrist, the cold, rough texture confirmed his guess. Getting a good grip, he pulled, hard, and it cracked. Lucius grunted and doubled over as the Doctor backed up, a stone hand and forearm in hand.

“But he’s…” Quintus stammered.

The Doctor stared at Lucius. “Show me,” he ordered, brandishing the arm.

Lucius threw his cloak back over his right shoulder. It was worse than the Doctor had expected. The man’s entire right side had been petrified, turned to stone. He was slowly becoming something else. This is seeding a planet on an entirely different level than Miss Foster attempted.

“The work of the gods,” the augur declared proudly.

“He’s stone,” Quintus said, an oddly plaintive note in his voice along with the expected disbelief.

“Armless enough, though,” the Doctor joked. “Whoops,” he said as he tossed the arm back to Lucius, who had to use his one good arm to catch it.

“Quintus!” he yelled as he ran for the window.

Resourceful in the end, the lad tossed the torch at the guards while the Doctor aimed the sonic screwdriver at the circuit boards. The tiles toppled over, eliciting a shout of anger from Lucius, and the Doctor and Quintus jumped out the window.

“Run!” he ordered Quintus, and they tore through the streets of Pompeii, back towards Foss Street.

When they’d run a quarter of a mile and there was no sign of pursuit, they slowed to a jog, then stopped at a corner. Quintus bent over, trying to catch his breath, and the Doctor patted him on the back.

“No sign of them. Nice little bit of allons-y. I think we’re all right.”

“But his arm, Doctor,” Quintus protested, fear in his eyes and a furrow between his brows. “Is that what’s happening to Evelina?”

Ah. That explains the plaintive voice. The Doctor tried to find an answer that would satisfy the
question Quintus was truly asking—could Evelina be healed—but truthfully, he suspected the change was irreversible.

Thankfully, a noise echoed down the street only a moment later, serving as a distraction from the question he couldn’t answer. Somewhere nearby a dog barked, and the Doctor cocked his head, trying to gauge the distance and direction the clunking came from.

“What was that?” the Doctor asked. It was still hours before the rumbling of the volcano should begin.

The ground shook again, and Quintus shrugged. “The mountain?”

“No, it’s closer,” the Doctor disagreed. Closer, and rhythmic. Like… “Footsteps,” he realised as things started to topple over from the vibrations.

“It can’t be,” Quintus said, but he sounded more resigned to the reality than like he was denying it.

The footsteps came closer, but they still didn’t have a form. The rumbling was enough to topple the chicken crates, causing the fowl to squawk indignantly.

_The hypocaust!_ the Doctor remembered. “Footsteps underground.”

“What is it?” Quintus whispered. “What is it?”

The Doctor grabbed him and turned him around, then started running again. The footsteps behind them got closer and closer, and steam billowed out of the open hypocausts in the street as their pursuer gained.

*Rose, we’re on our way back, but we aren’t alone.*

*Who’s after you?*

*I don’t know,* he told her. *Whatever it is, it’s large, and it’s travelling in the hypocaust.*

They whipped around the corner to Foss Street, and he could hear Rose’s voice, yelling at the family. “I’m telling you, we need to get out of here, right now!”

The Doctor and Quintus burst into the villa. “Caecilius?” the Doctor said. He looked around at the family, and Rose and Donna. “All of you, get out.”

Rose nodded and dragged the two servants who’d just emerged from the living quarters out of the villa, while Donna shook her head and stared at him. “Doctor, what is it?”

He put his hands on her shoulders and looked down at her. “I don’t know, but I don’t think it’s friendly,” he said, just as the grill from the hypocaust flew off. The Doctor’s eyes widened and he waved frantically at Donna and Evelina. “Just get out!”

But no one heeded his words. When he turned around to watch the progress of their attacker, he supposed he couldn’t blame them for being mesmerised by the sight. Cracks of fire appeared in the checkerboard floor around the hypocaust, and the steam billowed up even more than it did before.

A hand took his, and he looked down at Rose. *You should have stayed out there, Rose.*

She rolled her eyes. *Got the servants to safety, then came back to make sure you stayed safe,* she told him, her eyes daring him to argue.
The rumblings coming from the hypocaust crescendoed into a roar, and then an eight foot tall creature made of stone rose out of the opening, demolishing the vent in his progress. Fire glinted in his eyes and joints, making him look like a comic book villain.

“The gods are with us,” Evelina moaned.

The Doctor narrowed his eyes and studied the creature. It was just… rock, held together by fire.

*Fire!*

“Water. We need water,” he ordered, gesturing to the fish pond. “Quintus. All of you, get water. Donna!” She nodded quickly and ran off with Quintus and another maid.

The creature looked at each of them in turn, then breathed fire on a ficus, rendering it to ash. In the corner, Metella huddled in Caecilius’ arms, her face turned away from the monster.

Rose shifted to stand in front of the couple, in one of those moments that made the Doctor burst with pride while simultaneously driving him absolutely bonkers.

“Talk to us,” she said calmly, staring the stone creature in the eye. “You don’t need to hurt anyone here—just talk to us.”

“Talk to me,” the Doctor amended, uncaring if his correction annoyed Rose. Lucius had sicced this monster on him, not anyone else, and he would be the one to keep it distracted long enough for Quintus to take care of it. “I’m the Doctor. Just tell me who you are.”

The creature looked back and forth between them, apparently uncertain which one most deserved its fire… er, ire. Before it made up its mind, Quintus and a slave rushed into the room with buckets in hand. Quintus scooped water out of the pool and threw it at the monster, stopping it in its tracks.

They all moved back and watched with bated breath to see what would happen. The fire went out in the creature’s joints first, then in its eyes. Then the stone collapsed, shattering onto the floor.

“What was it?” Caecilius demanded.

“Carapace of stone,” the Doctor explained, “held together by internal magma. Not too difficult to stop, but I reckon that’s just the foot soldier.”

“Doctor, or whatever your name is, you bring bad luck on this house,” Metella said, her voice forbidding.

Rose put her hand on Quintus’ shoulder. “I thought your son was brilliant. Aren’t you going to thank him?” she suggested, raising her eyebrows at Caecilius and Metella. Mother and father moved forward to embrace their son, leaving the Doctor and Rose alone.

Still, if there are aliens at work in Pompeii, it’s a good thing we stayed, he told Rose.

*Yeah… but speaking of that, where’s Donna?*


Instead, he found Evelina staring at him, regretful tears in her eyes. “If you are looking for your friend, Doctor, you will not find her here.”

“What do you mean?” the Doctor and Rose asked in unison.
Evelina bit her lip, but tilted her head back defiantly. “She gave false prophecy about the fate of Pompeii. The High Priestess has declared that all false prophets must be put to death.”

“Oh, no they don’t,” the Doctor growled. “Where is this temple of yours? Because I am not going to let my friend die because she cared too much to leave you to your fate.”
Donna scowled up at the temple ceiling. “You have got to be kidding me.” This was not what she’d had in mind when she’d imagined seeing classical architecture in person. It was hard to enjoy it when she was strapped to an altar, surrounded by a bunch of girls who looked like goths dressed in red.

Only they weren’t goths. They were priestesses planning to sacrifice her. One priestess lifted her knife and stared at it dramatically. “The false prophet will surrender both her blood… and her breath.”

Donna tugged at her ropes, but they didn’t give. “I’ll surrender you in a minute,” Donna retorted. “Don’t you dare.” She wanted to think the Doctor and Rose would find her, but how would they even realise she’d been taken, since she hadn’t been able to call out?

The priestess glared at her, and the haughty gleam in her eyes would have triggered Donna’s ire even if the other woman hadn’t been preparing her for a sacrifice. “You will be silent,” the priestess ordered.

“Listen, sister,” Donna whispered. Then she raised her voice to a full yell. “You might have eyes on the back of your hands, but you’ll have eyes in the back of your head by the time I’ve finished with you.” Donna swivelled her head to look at the circle of priestesses gathered around the altar. “Let me go!”

“This prattling voice will cease forever,” the priestess intoned as she raised the knife above her head.

“Oh, that’ll be the day.”

Donna sighed with relief; the Doctor was here. She lifted her head and peered around the priestess, and Rose waved at her.

The priestess spun around and threw her head back when she saw the Doctor. “No man is allowed to enter the Temple of Sibyl.”

The Doctor pushed off the pillar he was leaning against and started meandering around the back half of the temple. “Well, that’s all right. Just us girls. Do you know, I met the Sibyl once. Yeah, hell of a woman. Blimey, she could dance the Tarantella. Nice teeth. Truth be told, I think she had a bit of a thing for me. I said it would never last. She said, ‘I know.’ Well, she would.”

While the Doctor was rambling and wandering around the temple, picking up artefacts and tossing them in the air, Rose had insinuated herself into the circle of priestesses and used her sonic screwdriver to undo the ropes binding Donna to the altar.

“You all right there?” she asked in a low voice as she worked.

The sound of the sonic screwdriver caught the sisters’ attention, and they turned around in time to see the knots came undone, freeing Donna. “What magic is this?” the leader asked, eyes wide.

Rose twirled her sonic screwdriver before sliding it into the coin purse she wore tied to her belt. “Just a little manipulation of the sound waves,” she said breezily. “Nothing magic about it.”

“Little less space woman, little more getting me off of here,” Donna grunted, and Rose smiled apologetically and helped her to her feet.
The Doctor was leaning against the altar when Rose and Donna hopped down to the floor. “Let me tell you about the Sibyl, the founder of this religion,” he said. “She would be ashamed of you. All her wisdom and insight turned sour. Is that how you spread the word, hey? On the blade of a knife?”

“Yes, a knife that now welcomes you.”

Rose took a step forward when the priestess raised her knife, but before she could do anything, another voice interrupted them from behind a gauzy red curtain.

“Bring them to me.”

The Sibylline Sisterhood spun in place, then knelt as one, facing the curtain. “High Priestess, the stranger would defile us.”

“Let me see,” the high priestess insisted. “This one is different. He and his mate carry starlight in their wake.”

Rose felt the same protective instinct from the Doctor that had shot through her a moment ago, and they shared a rueful look before climbing the stairs together.

“Oh, very perceptive,” the Doctor said as they approached the curtain. “Where do these words of wisdom come from?”

“The gods whisper to me,” she said, her gravelly voice making it sound like every word took effort.

“They’ve done far more than that,” the Doctor countered. Then he spun around to look at the sisters. “Might I beg audience? Look upon the High Priestess?”

Two sisters pulled back the curtain to reveal a woman made entirely of stone, clothed in the same red robes and veil of her priestesses. It wasn’t the strangest thing Rose had ever seen, but it did rank up there.

Donna, however, was shocked. “Oh, my God. What’s happened to you?”

“The heavens have blessed me.”

“If I might?” the Doctor asked, gesturing that he would like to touch her.

She held out an arm, and the Doctor and Rose both approached her. It was really, truly stone. When she and Donna had seen Evelina, Rose had wanted to believe that it was just… some kind of condition, something that happened in small doses, but this was far more than that.

“Does it hurt?” the Doctor asked softly.

The high priestess straightened haughtily. “It is necessary.”

Rose crossed her arms over her chest. “Who told you that?” she demanded. Honestly, all these religions with their glorious sacrifices…

“The voices,” the high priestess said enigmatically.

“Is that what’s going to happen to Evelina?” Donna asked.

Rose turned around and watched her look at all the sisters.

“Is this what’s going to happen to all of you?”
One of them pulled back the sleeve of her robe, revealing a large patch of stone. “The blessings are manifold.”

“They’re stone,” Donna whispered.

“Exactly.” The Doctor got to his feet and shoved his hands into his pockets.

Rose followed him back down to the temple floor and stood with Donna, watching the Doctor work.

“The people of Pompeii are turning to stone before the volcano erupts.” He spun back around the glare at the high priestess. “But why?”

She rose slightly off her bed. “This word, this image in your mind. This volcano. What is that?”

Rose narrowed her eyes. Something had been bothering her ever since Donna had pointed out that none of the soothsayers knew about the volcano. “Hang on, why don’t you know about it?” she demanded.

“Oh, very good, Rose.” The Doctor crossed his arms over his chest. “Who are you?”

“Oh, very good, Rose.” The Doctor crossed his arms over his chest. “Who are you?”

“High Priestess of the Sibylline,” she claimed proudly.

“No, no, no, no.” The Doctor shook his head. “I’m talking to the creature inside you. The thing that’s seeding itself into a human body, in the dust, in the lungs, taking over the flesh and turning it into, what?”

The high priestess looked rattled, as much as it was possible to determine a facial expression on a face of stone. “Your knowledge… is impossible,” she gasped.

“Oh, but you can read my mind. You know it’s not.” He shoved his hands in his pockets and stood to his full height. “I demand you tell me who you are.”

“We are… awakening,” the high priestess said, in a strange, dual-toned voice.

“We are… awakening,” the high priestess said, in a strange, dual-toned voice.

“The voice of the gods!” the sisters exclaimed. They swayed in place on the temple floor and began chanting, “Words of wisdom, words of power. Words of wisdom, words of power. Words of wisdom—”

The Doctor ignored them. The Sisterhood were not the ones in charge here. Instead, he stared down the creature who had once been their high priestess. “Name yourself. Planet of origin. Galactic coordinates. Species designation according to the universal ratification of the Shadow Proclamation.”

The creature on the bed slowly got to its feet. 

Make your way over the hypocaust, casually as possible. See if you can get it open without anyone noticing.

“We… are… rising,” the creature said, sounding less human with every word.

“Tell me your name!” the Doctor demanded, being as theatrical as possible to keep all the attention in the room focused on him while Rose crept over to the hypocaust.

“Pyrovile,” the high priestess cried out.

Donna sidled over to the Doctor’s side. “What’s a Pyrovile?” she asked.

The Doctor nodded at the high priestess. “Well, that’s a Pyrovile, growing inside her. She’s a halfway stage.”

“What, and that turns into…?” Donna asked, letting the question dangle open-ended.

“That thing in the villa. That was an adult Pyrovile.”

The high priestess pointed at him. “And the breath of a Pyrovile will incinerate you, Doctor.”

The Doctor reached into his inside jacket pocket and pulled out the yellow water pistol he’d found in his coat pockets before he and Rose had gone after Donna. “I warn you, I’m armed.”

Donna was still at his elbow, and he leaned closer to her. “Go help Rose. I’m right behind you.”

She crossed the temple floor, and the Doctor shifted a foot to the left so he was directly in the high priestess’ line of vision, keeping her attention focused on him. “What are the Pyrovile doing here?” he asked, pointing his water pistol at the Pyrovile’s heart.

“We fell from the heavens,” she said, still using the dual-toned voice. “We fell so far and so fast, we were rendered into dust.”

*Got it, Doctor,* Rose told him.

He adjusted his hold on the toy and shifted on the balls of his feet, ready to run. “Right, creatures of stone shattered on impact,” he muttered to himself.

He made eye contact with Rose over the high priestess’ shoulder. *Get down in there,* he told Rose. *I promise, I’m right behind you.*

*You’d better be,* she told him, and he watched just for a moment out of the corner of his eye as she convinced Donna to go down into the tunnel.

To keep the attention focused on him, he raised his voice. “When was that, seventeen years ago?”

The Pyrovile shook her head. “We have slept beneath for thousands of years.”

That only surprised the Doctor for a moment before he realised what it meant. He nodded quickly. “Okay, so seventeen years ago woke you up, and now you’re using human bodies to reconstitute yourselves.” He suddenly remembered the high priestess was not the only member of the Sibylline in the room, and turned quickly to brandish the weapon at the young women chanting on the floor before asking another question. “But why the psychic powers?”

“We opened their minds and found such gifts.”

The Doctor rolled his eyes. Humans didn’t *have* psychic gifts. Not like this, anyway. “Okay, that’s fine. So you force yourself inside a human brain, use the latent psychic talent to bond. I get that, I get that, yeah.” He shook his head. “But seeing the future? That is way beyond psychic. You can see through time. Where does the gift of prophecy come from?”

“We opened their minds and found such gifts.”

The high priestess wrinkled on the bed, and the Doctor decided that maybe his interview was over. “On second thought,” he said as he pivoted and started jogging towards the hypocaust, “maybe it doesn’t really matter.”

He’d almost made it when one of the sisters called his bluff. “Sisters, I see into his mind. The
weapon is harmless.”

The Doctor shrugged. “Yeah, but it’s got to sting,” he countered, shooting the high priestess several times before dropping through the open grate, down into the tunnel.

The heat hit him like a brick wall, and he took a second to regulate his own internal temperature before grinning at Rose and Donna. “Just the kind of weapon I like,” he said, squirting into the air.

Donna laughed. “You fought her off with a water pistol. I bloody love you.”

Rose pushed herself off the wall and grabbed his hand. “Mmm, so do I,” she agreed.

Donna wrinkled her nose. “Not quite what I meant.”

The Doctor rolled his eyes. “This way,” he said, before Donna could go into another long tirade about how unappealing she found his attributes.

“Where are we going now?” Donna asked.

The Doctor shook his head, pulling his thoughts away from the amusement he could feel fizzling over the bond. “Into the volcano.”

Donna gaped at him. “No way.”

“Yes way.” He twirled the water pistol around his finger as he started into the tunnel. “Appian Way.”

Rose snorted. “You are such a dork,” she told him.

The Doctor pointed at her with the water pistol and shook his head. “Never let a pun pass you by, Rose,” he said seriously. “They are the height of humour.”

She nodded, although the Doctor suspected the serious expression on her face was fake. “Whatever you say, Doctor.”

Choosing to ignore the affectionate mockery in her voice, the Doctor brought the conversation back to Pompeii, rambling as they walked. “Why can’t this lot predict a volcano? Why is it being hidden?”

“And why doesn’t it feel like a fixed point?” Rose asked. “Because I think those questions have the same answer, don’t you?”

He nodded as he ducked beneath some low-hanging rocks. “That seems highly likely. So we have a fixed point that doesn’t hurt and soothsayers with an uncanny knack for speaking the truth who can’t see the one thing we know for sure is coming for this city.”

As they jogged towards Vesuvius, Donna asked the question that had been building in her mind ever since they’d discovered the Pyrovile were behind what was going on in Pompeii. “But if it’s aliens setting off the volcano, doesn’t that make it all right for you to stop it?”

He shook his head as they walked down roughly cut stairs into a larger cavern with a fire burning in the middle. “Still part of history. Still a fixed point.”

Donna looked over at Rose, and she nodded. “Doctor, I told you that Donna and I think we should save Caecilius and his family.”

“And I told you that we can’t,” he snapped.
To Donna’s surprise, Rose stopped dead in the middle of the tunnel. Her palla had slid off her head to drape around her shoulders, and she put one hand on her hip. “Give me one reason why we can’t,” she insisted. “We’re not talking about changing the fixed point, or saving everyone in the whole town.”

The Doctor raked his hands through his hair. “Just one family?”

“Just one.” The hard line of Rose’s jaw softened and she took the Doctor’s hand. “Wouldn’t you feel better if we saved someone, even though we can’t save them all? Wouldn’t it be better to show as much compassion as possible?”

He sighed and clenched his eyes shut, but a moment later, Donna watched the lines around his eyes smooth out. “You’re right. Thank you, Rose.”

“Thank Donna,” she said. “It was her idea.”

Something roared in the distance behind them before the Doctor could offer Donna his thanks. “They know we’re here.” He pushed Donna into another narrow tunnel with a hand on the small of her back. “Come on.”

“Of course they know we’re here,” Donna said breathlessly as they ran. “They watched us disappear through the hypocaust.”

Rose chuckled. “She has a point, Doctor. We weren’t exactly stealthy.”

“Oi!” the Doctor protested. “Is this what my life’s going to be from now on? The two of you, ganging up on me?”

To his surprise, Rose’s hand went limp in his when he suggested that. He glanced down at her, but the tunnels had just broadened out again, leaving them in an open cavern where voices could echo.

Rose? he asked as they carefully picked their way down a rocky incline. The closer they got to the heart of the volcano, the warmer it got.

Rose bit her lip. Is it really okay if we save Caecilius and his family? she asked. I don’t want you to feel like we’ve forced you to do something you’re not comfortable with.

The Doctor smiled and brushed a kiss over her knuckles before dropping her hand. I promise, it’s just fine. I was only teasing when I said you were ganging up on me.

The last tunnel finally led them onto a rocky overhang that gave them a view of the mountain’s opening, and the Pyrovile marching around the lower cavern. “It’s the heart of Vesuvius. We’re right inside the mountain.”

“There’s tons of them,” Donna whispered.

The basalt they’d been walking through gave way to porous pumice. Magma bubbled up through cracks in the Earth, and everything looked… well, volcanic. Everything but that, the Doctor realised when his gaze landed on something distinctly artificial in appearance. He pulled a spyglass out of his jacket pocket and used it to get a better glimpse. “What’s that thing?”

Distant footsteps rumbled in the tunnel they’d just walked through, and Rose crouched lower to the ground. “Better think of something fast, Doctor,” she said. “I don’t think they’re gonna leave us alone for much longer.”
The Doctor pressed his lips together. The artificial structure he’d spotted was a door. “That’s how they arrived,” he said, handing Rose the glass so she could look. “Or what’s left of it. Escape pod? Prison ship? Gene bank?”

“But why do they need a volcano?” Donna asked reasonably. “Maybe it erupts, and they launch themselves back into space or something?”

The Doctor thought of the humans he’d witnessed turning to stone, and shook his head. The Pyrovile didn’t want to return home. “Oh, it’s worse than that.”

“What do you mean, worse?” Rose asked as she handed the spyglass back.

Donna glanced over her shoulder when the rumbling sounded behind them. “Doctor, it’s getting closer.”

“Heathens! Defilers!” Lucius stood in the middle of the crater below and shouted at the Pyrovile. “They would desecrate your temple, my lord gods.”

*Oh, that’s not good. That’s very much not good.* “Come on,” the Doctor hissed, eager to get out of range before the Pyrovile could track them down.

“We can’t go in,” Donna protested as he led them forward, deeper into the volcano and closer to Lucius and the Pyrovile.

“Well, we can’t go back,” the Doctor retorted. A groaning rumble sounded from the tunnel at their backs to prove his point.

“Crush them. Burn them,” Lucius ordered.

The Doctor scrambled over the rocks, heedless of noise now. Behind him, Rose and Donna sent more rocks skittering down the slope. A huge Pyrovile rose up out of the rocks and loomed over them, and they skidded to a halt. The Doctor stared for a second before he reached into his back pocket and pulled the water pistol out.

The Pyrovile shrieked when it was hit by the stream of water, and the Doctor, Rose, and Donna used its moment of confusion to dart around it to the escape pod, dodging the flames of the Pyrovile as they ran.

“There is nowhere to run, Doctor and daughters of London,” Lucius hollered.

The Doctor paused in the door of the escape pod, his water pistol held at the ready. “Now then, Lucius. My lords Pyrovillian, don’t get yourselves in a lather.”

Rose and Donna groaned, and he looked over his shoulder at them.

“In a lava? No?” They shook their heads, and he shrugged. “No. But if I might beg the wisdom of the gods before we perish. Once this new race of creatures is complete, then what?”

Because that was what it really came down to. This was the Pyroviles’ last chance, though he didn’t use those words.

The Pyrovile stomped towards them, his fiery footsteps crushing rocks as he went. The Doctor kept an eye on him, while waiting for an answer from Lucius.

“My masters will follow the example of Rome itself,” Lucius shouted. “An almighty empire,
bestriding the whole of civilisation.”

Donna took a step forward. “But if you’ve crashed, and you’ve got all this technology, why don’t you just go home?”

“The Heaven of Pyrovilla is gone,” Lucius explained.

“What do you mean, gone? Where’s it gone?” the Doctor asked as the mountain rumbled beneath his feet. He could feel seconds ticking by and knew the time of the eruption was almost upon them… if he could repair the timelines so it actually happened.

“It was taken,” Lucius shouted. “Pyrovilla is lost. But there is heat enough in this world for a new species to rise.”

Rose snorted. “You do realise it’s like, seventy percent water out there?”

Even from a distance, Lucius’ smirk was obvious. “Water can boil. And everything will burn, Doctor.”

The Doctor pressed his lips together and nodded once. “Then the whole planet is at stake,” he said as he put the pistol back in his belt. “Thank you. That’s all I needed to know,” He bowed, then gestured for the women to go into the escape pod. “Rose, Donna.”

He followed them inside and then used the sonic screwdriver to seal the doors. “Could we be any more trapped?” Donna asked.

Rose shook her head. “We’re exactly where we need to be, aren’t we, Doctor?” She’d felt the turmoil in his mind calm the moment he realised the entire planet was in danger.

Instead of answering, he peered at the controls, not even blinking when steam filled the chamber as the Pyrovile tried to smoke them out.

Donna took a breath and fanned her face. “Little bit hot.”

“See?” The Doctor pointed at the circuits, which had been set up along the wall of the pod. “The energy converter takes the lava, uses the power to create a fusion matrix, which welds Pyrovile to human. Now that it’s complete, they can convert millions.”

Rose sucked in a breath. He’d turned the controls on as he explained, but she had a feeling he wasn’t going to let the energy converter work according to plan. And that meant…

“That’s why they can’t see the volcano,” she realised. “If the Pyrovile are using the lava, they’re funneling all that power away from the mountain. It’s never going to erupt.”

“And they’re going to use the power of the volcano to take over the world,” the Doctor concluded.

Donna looked from the Doctor to Rose and back again. “But you can change it back.”

Tears sprang to Rose’s eyes when she saw the choice looming before the Doctor. It wasn’t a choice anyone should ever have to make, and somehow, it always fell on his shoulders.

He nodded once in answer to Donna’s question. “I can invert the system, set off the volcano, and blow them up, yes. But…” He looked at them then, and for once, his age showed in the lines of his face. “That’s the choice, Donna. It’s Pompeii or the world.”

Donna recoiled from the pain in his eyes. “Oh, my God.”
“If Pompeii is destroyed then it’s not just history, it’s me. I make it happen.”

Rose took his hand. “No, Doctor. We make it happen.” He frowned at her, and she brushed her thumb over his knuckles. “It has to be done, but the responsibility won’t rest on your shoulders alone.”

His body shook with repressed emotion. “Vesuvius explodes with the force of twenty-four nuclear bombs. There’s no way we’ll survive.”

His eyes begged her to find another way, but there wasn’t one. It was their first, “I could save the world but lose you,” moment since their year-long holiday, and Rose tried to project as much trust as possible over the bond.

He closed his eyes for a moment, then went to work on the controls, resetting them to funnel the power of the mountain out through the volcano, instead of into the energy converter.

When the controls were reset, the Doctor swallowed hard and put his hands on the lever. “Push this lever and it’s over.” He looked at Rose, then at Donna. “Twenty thousand people.”

Rose put her hands down on top of his, and a moment later, Donna rested hers on the lever in between theirs. The three of them shared a last look, then closed their eyes and pushed.

The change was immediate. The mountain rumbled beneath their feet, shaking the pod and tossing them around.

Time shifted, too, and the Doctor and Rose both felt it. There was a moment, just a second, where timelines blurred and a rift in time opened before healing itself almost instantly.

At the same time, the fixed point cemented back into place. The Doctor and Rose both shuddered as their time senses awoke with all the fury of a cat who’d been dropped in water. As uncomfortable as the sensation was, it was also a relief that this moment finally felt as forbidden to them as it should have from the start.

The pod whirled and tilted as it was projected through the air. “Come on,” the Doctor shouted. “Get down on the ground.” He pulled Rose and Donna both down with him and wrapped an arm around each of them, trying to protect their heads from falling rocks.

But there was no staying safe when the pod spun end over end, and eventually, he gave up and covered his own head. They were tossed about for almost a minute until they landed with a hard thud.

The door popped open when they hit the ground, and they crawled out at the base of the mountain. “It was an escape pod,” he mumbled as he looked up at the sky.

The Doctor looked back towards the rumbling mountain, and his eyes widened when he saw the pyroclastic flow of ash and rock rushing towards them. He grabbed Rose and Donna’s hands and yanked them towards Pompeii.

“Come on!” he yelled as they ran. “We’ve got to get to Caecilius’ before the worst of the ash hits, or we’re going to die!”

Day turned to night as the cloud of ash blocked the sun. When they reached Pompeii, people were standing in the streets, staring at the mountain in horror. None of them had any frame of reference for something like this, any way to explain what had happened today. To a society living before the age of scientific discovery, it would appear that the gods had gone mad, raging at the people on the Earth
Donna slowed, and her slack hand fell from the Doctor’s grasp. There was so much destruction all around her… so much death coming. She stared at the people running towards the water, and even though she knew this had to happen, she couldn’t help but yell advice at them. “Don’t. Don’t go to the beach,” she shouted, remembering how tsunami worked. “Don’t go to the beach; go to the hills. Listen to me. Don’t go to the beach. It’s not safe. Listen to me.”

No one listened. Rose took her hand and pulled her away.

“Come on, Donna,” she said, pitching her voice low to be heard. “We can’t save them, but if we hurry, we can save our one family. Remember?”

Donna looked away from a little boy crying in the street and swiped at the tears on her face. “Yeah. I just…” She nodded. “Yeah.”

“Come on,” the Doctor said, leading the way to Foss Street.

When they reached the villa, Caecilius, Metella, Quintus, and Evelina were huddled together against one of the interior walls. “Gods save us, Doctor,” Caecilius shouted as his family whimpered in fear. The Doctor took a deep breath and nodded. “Come with me,” he ordered, then ran for the TARDIS, pulling his key out as he went.

He stalked towards the console, talking to the TARDIS as he went. It’s my fault, he lamented. I swore I’d never push another button like that, but you made me do it.

She hummed apologetically while he moved around the console, setting the coordinates for a safe distance from the disaster. Rose joined him and helped him finish, and a moment later, Donna ushered the stunned Pompeiiian family into the TARDIS.

“It’s all right,” she said soothingly when Caecilius froze in the doorway. “I promise. We’re going to take you someplace safe.”

“We can’t stay here, Dad,” Evelina said, her voice soft, and together, she and Quintus convinced their parents to enter the ship.

Rose guided them to the railing, and once they were hanging on, the Doctor flipped the lever without a word. There were no words for a day like today, and he wouldn’t disrespect their guests or the people who’d died by pretending there were.

The TARDIS was kind enough to give them a light landing, and he stuck his hands into his pockets and nodded at the door. “I think you’ll find we’re safe now,” he said quietly.

Caecilius and Metella blinked at him in confusion, but Quintus nodded and pushed the door open. “Come on, Dad,” he said quietly. “Look, we’re safe.”

The Doctor put his coat back on while everyone else filed out of the ship onto a hill some twenty miles from Vesuvius. When the ship was empty, he ran his fingers lightly over the controls, then followed them outside.

They stood on the hill in silence, watching the destruction of Pompeii. Then the Doctor took a breath and turned to the man standing beside him. “It’s never forgotten, Caecilius,” he promised. “Oh, time will pass, men’ll move on, and stories will fade. But one day, Pompeii will be found again. In thousands of years. And everyone will remember you.”
Donna stepped out of the shadows to stand by Evelina. “What about you, Evelina? Can you see anything?”

The girl shook her head. “The visions have gone.”

Rose put a hand on the young woman’s shoulder. “The force of the eruption actually cracked open a rift in time, just for a second,” she explained.

The Doctor nodded. Finally, there was an answer to everything. “That’s what gave you the gift of prophecy. It echoed back into the Pyrovillian alternative. But not any more.” He smiled at her. “You’re free.”

“But tell me,” whispered Metella. “Who are you, Doctor? With your words, and your temple containing such size within?”

“Oh, I was never here.” She frowned, and he shook his head quickly. “Don’t tell anyone.”

“The great god Vulcan must be enraged,” Caecilius mused. “It’s so volcanic. It’s like some sort of volcano. All those people,” he sobbed, and Metella turned and buried her face in his shoulder as they watched the destruction of the only life they’d ever known.

And that’s our cue to leave. Rose and Donna were already slipping back inside the TARDIS, and the Doctor took one last look at Vesuvius before he joined them.

Rose was at the console, and as soon as he closed the doors, she threw the dematerialisation lever. The Doctor took his coat off as he felt the TARDIS slip into the Vortex, then he looked at Donna, who was staring down at her clasped hands.

“Donna Noble,” he said, giving her name some weight. She looked up at him, and he tried to let her see how grateful he was to her. “Thank you. Thank you for helping us find a way to show compassion, even when we’re dealt a bad hand.”

Donna smiled and tipped her head back. “Thank you,” she returned. “For being the people I thought you were.”

The Doctor nodded. “Time for a night in, I think.”

Donna rubbed at her face, streaking tears and ash over it. “Yeah,” she agreed wearily. “There’s an enormous bathtub in my ensuite that’s calling my name.” She paused at the entrance to the corridor. “I’ll see you for breakfast?”

“Of course,” Rose said, and Donna nodded, then walked away.

The Doctor tossed his coat onto the strut and took Rose’s hand. “I think a bath sounds like an excellent idea, don’t you?”

“Yeah.”

Rose ran her hands over the wall as they walked to their room, and when they pushed the door open, they could hear the water running and see steam billowing out of the ensuite. They both stripped silently, tossing their soiled, dusty clothes straight into the laundry chute.

The tension in the Doctor’s body was obvious when he stood before her, naked and vulnerable. Come with me, my love, she beckoned, walking backwards toward the open door. He followed, only hesitating when she turned the shower on instead of stepping into the bath.
“We need to rinse off quickly first,” she told him gently. “Or our bathwater will get muddy.”

He nodded, and they both stepped under the stream of water for a few minutes, letting it rinse away most of the ash and get their hair thoroughly wet.

After turning the water off, Rose climbed into the bath and indicated that he should sit down in front of her. *Let me take care of you tonight.*

The slight hitch in his chest wouldn’t have been noticeable to most, but Rose knew her Doctor. She waited patiently while he stepped gingerly into the water and sat down, his spine stiff.

Rose took the bottle of shampoo from the ledge of the bathtub and squeezed some into her hands, rubbing them together until it formed a rich lather. The Doctor sighed when she sank her hands into his hair, massaging the shampoo into the scalp and getting every bit of dust and grime washed away.

“Tilt your head back,” she ordered softly. When she could see his eyebrows, she reached for the cup on the ledge and used it to rinse the soap away.

“Feel better?” she asked when his hair was clean.

He nodded, but she could still feel the tension in his body. “What about you?” he asked.

Rose started to tell him that this was for him, not her, but then she caught a glimpse of his thoughts—he’d been on edge all day, afraid they wouldn’t get out in time. Then in the escape pod when they pressed the lever, he’d been certain they were going to die. He needed to take care of her for a moment, just like she’d needed to take care of him.

They turned carefully in the tub, managing not to slosh huge amounts of water onto the rim as they moved. Rose’s hair had dried slightly while they’d sat in the bath, and the Doctor used the cup to get it wet again before washing it. Well-trained, he reached for the conditioner next and carefully untangled the snarls that had formed, not rinsing it out until he was satisfied.

“I think that’s good enough,” Rose said gently when he set the cup down. She leaned forward and pulled the plug, then stood up and grabbed the warm, fluffy towels that were waiting on the rack. “Let’s put pyjamas on and go to bed.”

After drying off, Rose started to wring the water out of her hair with an extra soft towel kept just for that purpose. However, the Doctor pulled it from her hands and motioned for her to sit on the bed. The towel she’d wrapped around herself tugged loose as she sat down, and she let it fall to her waist.

A moment later, Rose felt his fingers comb through her hair. “You shouldn’t go to bed with wet hair.” She heard the hum of the sonic screwdriver, then felt the subtle vibrations shift against her scalp as he used it to get her head dry.

A tingling sensation started at the base of her skull, triggered by the combination of the Doctor’s fingers and the sonic massage. The rhythmic motion of his hands seemed to spread the tingles, until they covered her whole scalp.

A moan escaped her lips when he pressed his fingertips to her scalp and massaged lightly. “Doctor…”

“Frisson,” he whispered. “I didn’t think about it before, but I’m not surprised the sonic caused it.”

His fingers slowed, and finally he pulled them away from her head. Rose sighed in disappointment as the feeling faded, but at least the remaining tension from the day seemed to have left her body. She
pulled on one of the Doctor’s vests and slipped under the covers.

Watching the Doctor, she quickly realised he was more tightly wound now than he had been when they’d entered their room. She rolled over onto her side and watched him meticulously hang up their towels and clean up the water on the bathroom floor.

When he ran out of meaningless chores to fill the time, he shuffled over to the bureau and found a clean pair of pants to put on. Then he climbed into bed and lay flat on his back, staring up at the ceiling for a long moment, until Rose reached out hesitantly and took his hand.

That simple gesture seemed to flip a switch. A choked sob escaped his throat, and he rolled over and pressed himself to her side.

Rose blinked, but she responded almost immediately, rubbing his shoulders and stroking his hair. “Talk to me, love,” she pleaded.

He drew a shuddering breath and wrapped his arm around her, pulling her close. “Too much like pressing the button,” he mumbled.

Her heart clenched. The parallel had not been lost on her, either, but feeling his aching sorrow as he said the words made it so much worse.

“Only you weren’t there when I killed everyone that time. You were there today, and it was—”

The Doctor swallowed hard. It wasn’t his fault. It wasn’t. If he said it was, Rose would tell him she’d chosen to be there. It wasn’t his fault.

Her gentle fingers stroked along his temples, and he sighed. “That’s right, love,” she whispered. “It wasn’t your fault. And not only that, but we all made it out just fine. We’re here. We’re home.”

He blinked. That… that was true. How had he missed that? He turned his head slightly so he could see more of their room. They were home.

He sighed and pressed himself tighter against Rose’s side. “But… that wasn’t the only thing,” he said quietly. “You and Donna, you both wanted me to save someone.”

She caught the amorphous thoughts floating through his head, but they were too scattered and trauma-driven to make any sense to her. “Why didn’t you want to?”

He turned his head so it was resting on her shoulder. “You don’t understand, Rose. It wasn’t that I didn’t want to; it was that I did. I wanted to save someone… I wanted to save everyone.”

She felt a tear on her shoulder and waited while he took a few deep breaths to bring himself back under control. “Why could I save someone today, but not on Gallifrey?” he finally whispered.

Rose didn’t have an answer for that. The best she could do was reach through the bond and soothe the ache she could feel pulsing back to her. He shuddered again when she traced a light telepathic touch over the open wound, but eventually, she felt him drift off to sleep.

Even his sleep was fitful though, and Rose wondered, not for the first time, if there wasn’t some way of saving Gallifrey without giving the Time Lords free rein to wreak havoc on the galaxy. It was an impossible wish, but if they ever found a way, however faint the possibility of success, she was determined to make it happen.

oOoOoOoOo
When Rose woke up the next morning, the Doctor’s head was pillowed on her chest, his hair tickling at her neck and chin. His desperate hold had relaxed in his sleep, the arm that had been clutching tightly to her now draped over her waist.

She smiled and combed her fingers through his hair. It didn’t often happen that she woke up before him, so the chance to witness him completely relaxed was welcome.

The Doctor stirred, and his lips brushed against the swell of her breast. “You can keep doing that,” he mumbled as she scraped her nails over his scalp.

Rose chuckled, but her hand slowed. “I can’t actually,” she told him.

“Oh, come on!” He pressed his head into her hand, silently begging for more.

Rose gave his hair one last stroke, then pushed at his shoulders. “I’m starving, and I need to wee.”

The Doctor flopped onto his back, his arm flung dramatically over his head. “Fine,” he muttered as Rose hopped out of bed. “I guess I’ll make breakfast then.”

After using the toilet and freshening up a bit, Rose pulled on slippers and her dressing gown and went to the galley. The Doctor was putting bacon in the frying pan, and several bowls of various sizes cluttered the countertop.

“Crepes?” Rose guessed when she saw the thin batter and the large, flat pan.

“Yep! I don’t know what Donna likes, but she strikes me as someone who enjoys good food.”

Rose leaned against the counter and watched for a moment as he sliced strawberries. “And then what do you want to do today?”

The knife stilled, and his expression was sober when he looked up at her. “I really need a slow day,” he admitted. “Is that all right?”

His brow furrowed slightly, and Rose reached out to rub the crease away. “Of course it is, Doctor. I could do with a bit of quiet myself. A walk in the woods, maybe? With a picnic?”

He nodded, but he still looked too uncertain for Rose’s satisfaction. She glanced quickly around the kitchen, smiling when her gaze landed on the bowl of strawberries. She snagged a whole berry and popped it into her mouth, humming at the sweet flavour.

The Doctor narrowed his eyes and shook his finger at her. “No snitching, Rose Tyler. If you eat it all now, we won’t have anything left for breakfast.”

Rose arched her eyebrow and grabbed another berry, then danced back a few steps. She bit into the strawberry, feeling the juice drip over her lips as she maintained eye contact with the Doctor.

“How do you plan to stop me?” She licked her lips and watched his Adam’s apple bob in response.

Then he was standing in front of her, bringing the hand still holding the rest of the berry to his mouth and taking it from her with his teeth. *I think I'll just have to teach you how to share.* He tugged on her hand until she was close enough for him to wrap his other arm around her waist.

“Doctor…” Rose whined softly. He chuckled, but gave in and pressed his lips to hers.
Her mouth opened beneath his immediately, letting his tongue sweep inside, chasing the lingering
taste of strawberries. The hand on her back flexed, then pulled her closer. *I'll never get tired of
kissing you.*

Rose sighed and her hands raked through his hair. *Well I hope not!* She scraped her teeth against his
lip, and he groaned softly into her mouth.

“Good morning!”

Donna’s louder-than-usual greeting made the Doctor and Rose jump back like guilty teenagers. She
stood in the doorway, her hands on her hips and a mildly amused look on her face.

“I know this is your home, but I think we need to make a list of places I don’t want to catch you
snogging.” She tilted her head. “Scratch that, I’d rather not catch you snogging anywhere.”

The Doctor felt his ears turn bright red and he ran a hand through his hair, trying to tame the wild
hedgehog look he knew he sported. Donna pressed her lips together, trying not to laugh, so he
suspected he’d failed spectacularly.

“Sorry, Donna.” He shuffled his feet back and forth. “It won’t happen again.”

She snorted. “Somehow I have a hard time believing that. You’ve been married for a year and you
still look at each other with hearts in your eyes, like you’re on your honeymoon.”

Rose poured water into the kettle and turned it on. “We’ve been married for three years actually,” she
said while pulling mugs and the tea canister out of the cupboard.

“But—”

“Time machine,” she reminded the other woman. “And we’ve been alone for the last year, so I guess
we’ve forgotten to be considerate of other people who might walk in. Sorry.”

Donna relaxed and waved off the apology with a smile. “If you’ve been on your own for a year, I
can see how you might forget.” She raised an eyebrow. “That’s not permission to let it happen again,
mind.”

The Doctor rolled his eyes. “No, you’ve made your position on that very clear. Now, breakfast?”

oOoOoOoOo

After the somewhat awkward start, breakfast was perfect. The Doctor’s assumption that Donna
would enjoy crepes was proven correct, and they talked and joked for nearly an hour before leaving
the table.

When they’d done the washing up and put everything away, Donna looked at the Doctor and Rose.
“Well. Where are we going today?”

To her surprise, Rose reached into the pantry and pulled out a picnic hamper. “We thought we’d take
it easy today—just a picnic in the countryside. You up for it?”

Donna felt a band ease around her chest, and she sighed as her whole body relaxed. “Yeah, that
sounds perfect,” she agreed, and helped Rose make sandwiches while the Doctor added drinks and
picnic dishes.

When the hamper was full, he nodded at the door. “Well, let’s go then,” he said, leading the way to
the console room.

Donna sat down gingerly on the jump seat and watched the Doctor and Rose move together around the console. It was like a dance, the way they spun and twisted in harmony to reach all the levers and knobs at the right time.

When the ship landed, she shoved aside the worry that today would be another day like yesterday and walked to the door. “So, where are we?” she asked as they stepped outside. The sun was warm on her shoulders and she caught a sweet floral fragrance in the air. “Are we on an alien planet?”

The Doctor shook his head. “We’re on Earth. Italy—Tuscany to be exact. The year is…” He tilted his head slightly. “1324.”

Rose linked her arm through the Doctor’s and rested her head on his shoulder. “Sometimes, after a trip like yesterday, we just need…”

She sighed, and the Doctor picked up the train of thought. “We need to do something to remember that it was worth it. Making the choice to let Vesuvius erupt was hard on all of us, but if we hadn’t…” He stretched his arm out and gestured at the gently rolling hills surrounding them. “None of this would be here anymore. Or if it was, it wouldn’t look like this.”

Donna looked at the hills covered in vineyards with new eyes. She hadn’t slept well the night before, unable to stop thinking about the people they hadn’t saved. The little boy who’d been scooped up by his mother, the fruit vendor who’d sold the TARDIS to Caecilius in the first place… Every face she’d seen in their twenty-four hours in Pompeii had gone through her head on a constantly repeating reel.

But with her lungs full of the rich, loamy scent of tilled earth and a castle looming in the distance, her enthusiasm for travelling returned. They’d saved the whole planet yesterday! She, Donna Noble, temp from Chiswick, had helped save the Earth from alien invasion.

Oh, no one back home would ever believe this.
Taking a day to simply enjoy the planet he’d saved so many times was the right choice, the Doctor decided the next morning. He felt better, and looking at Rose and Donna, it was obvious the feeling was mutual.

Today, the familiar excitement of travel buzzed in his fingertips, and he reached up to straighten his tie. When he felt the soft cotton of his undershirt instead of a tie, he buttoned a second button on his blue suit coat instead, then grinned at the ladies.

“Are we ready?”

“Yes!” they chorused.

The controls were already set to random, and he raised his eyebrows dramatically as he grabbed the dematerialisation lever. “Donna Noble… Hold on!”

The trip through the Vortex was rocky, as it often was when she she flew without a destination. Only Rose, holding onto the railing, managed to stay on her feet and not get flung around the room.

The Doctor jumped to his feet when they finally landed. “Set the controls to random.” He brushed his hands together and winked at Donna. “Mystery tour. Outside that door could be any planet, anywhere, anywhen in the whole wide u— Are you all right?”

Donna had looked at the door when he’d pointed, but now she was staring at him, eyes wide and pupils blown. “Terrified,” she gasped. “I mean, history’s one thing but an alien planet?”

“I could always take you home,” the Doctor said, half teasing, half testing. If she really couldn’t handle an alien planet, it would be better to find out now.

But she just rolled her eyes and pointed at him. “Yeah, don’t laugh at me.”

Rose laughed and linked her elbow with Donna’s. “Nah, he’s not,” she promised. “I mean… we know what it’s like, don’t we?”

Donna raised an eyebrow and looked from Rose to the Doctor. “You mean the two of you still get those butterflies when you land on a new planet?”

The Doctor stuck his hands in his trouser pockets and wandered over to them. “Cross my hearts,” he promised. “Everything you’re feeling right now. The fear, the joy, the wonder? We get that.”

“Seriously?” Her eyes sparkled. “After all this time?”

Rose rolled her eyes. “I swear, Donna, the number of times he’s bounded out of here like a kid in a candy store…”

“Pot and kettle,” the Doctor sang, tapping her on the nose.

“Oh. All right then—we all feel it.” Donna spun around and walked towards the ramp, and the Doctor grabbed his coat while she rambled. “This is barmy. I was born in Chiswick.” She turned back around when she reached the door. “I’ve only ever had package holidays. Now I’m here. This is so… I mean it’s… I don’t know, it’s all sort of…” She finally shook her head and laughed breathlessly. “I don’t even know what the word is.”
She pulled the door open and disappeared outside, and the console room filled with the Doctor and Rose’s laughter. “I forgot how much fun it is to introduce new people to travel in the TARDIS,” Rose said as they walked down the ramp.

“Oh yeah, it’s—” The rest of the Doctor’s sentence died on his tongue when they stepped outside into a snowstorm.

“Real, proper snow!” Rose squealed. “Oh, that’s a bit more like it!” She tilted her head back and stuck her tongue out to catch a snowflake.

Donna was squinting into the blinding whiteness, and the Doctor leaned over and nudged her with his elbow. “Come on, Donna. What do you think?”

“Bit cold.” She wrapped her arms around herself and rubbed her shoulders, left bare by her sleeveless top.

The Doctor gestured to the expanse of frozen wilderness in front of them. Massive icicles hung from a natural bridge. “Look at that view.”

“Yes. Beautiful, cold view,” Donna repeated.

“Millions of planets, millions of galaxies, and we’re on this one. Molto bene. Bellissimo, says Donna, born in Chiswick.”

Rose rolled her eyes when the Doctor started to ramble. She caught Donna’s eye and tilted her head towards the TARDIS, and the other woman nodded quickly.

“Sorry about him,” Rose said as she led the way to the wardrobe room, which was waiting just off the console room today. “He’s not the most practical person in the universe. Plus, he’s got that coat and he’s better equipped for handling the cold naturally.”

A rack of coats hung just inside the door, and Donna grabbed the thickest one with a faux fur-lined hood and slid her bare arms into it. “What, he doesn’t get cold like the rest of us?”

“Nope,” Rose told her as she put on a black pea coat the TARDIS had put out just for her. A red scarf hung on the hanger with it, and she quickly wrapped it around her neck, realising vaguely that the ensemble made her look at least a little professional—unlike the last time she’d provided winter gear for Rose.

“What are you planning, dear? The TARDIS just hummed, and Rose chuckled.

“Come on,” she told Donna. “He’s just realised we’re not there.”

The Doctor was staring at the TARDIS when they walked back outside. “Sorry, you were saying?” Donna said, obviously feeling much more chipper in her warm coat.

“Better?” the Doctor asked, looking at her, then at Rose.

“Oh yeah,” Rose confirmed. The wind nipped at her ears and nose, but the wool coat kept most of her body warm. She took the Doctor’s hand and brushed her thumb over his. You forget that humans don’t have your tolerance for extreme temperatures.

He nodded, then looked at Donna, crunching her away across the snow to them. “Comfy?”

“Yep,” she chirped.
The Doctor raised an eyebrow. “Can you hear anything inside that?”

Donna leaned forward and squinted up at him. “Pardon?”

A peal of laughter escaped Rose; Donna’s dry wit was going to make travelling with her so much fun.

The Doctor grinned and shook his head. “All right, I was saying, citizen of the Earth…”

Again, his impressive introductory speech was interrupted, this time by a red and white rocket breaching the atmosphere and slowly gliding in for a landing.

“Rocket,” Donna breathed. “Blimey, a real, proper rocket. Now that’s what I call a spaceship.” She tapped the Doctor on the chest. “You’ve got a box; he’s got a Ferrari.”

“Oi!” the Doctor said. “Don’t knock the TARDIS.”

Donna shook her head. “I’m just saying, your ship isn’t exactly flash. I mean, it’s not the kind of spaceship that would help a bloke pick up girls.”

“Wellll…”

The Doctor swung their hands between them, and Rose laughed when she felt how smug he was. She grinned at Donna. “That would depend on the girl.”

Donna pursed her lips and shook her head. “You’re mental, both of you.” Then she shrugged. “All right, where to? Or are we just going to stand here until we’re so covered in snow, we blend in with the landscape?”

Rose nodded in the direction the rocket had been going. “Let’s see what Mr. Flash is up to.”

They followed the rocket contrail, though they had to skirt around mountains and ravines along the way. The planet really was breathtakingly beautiful, Rose mused as they walked across the natural bridge she’d spotted earlier, spanning a deep crevasse in the ice.

Something built in the air—a song of sorts. Rose and the Doctor both slowed as it echoed around them, but Donna kept walking.

The Doctor held up his hand. “Hold on, can you hear that?” Rose nodded, but Donna tilted her head and looked at him quizzically. “Donna, take your hood down,” he snapped.

“What?” she asked as she complied.

“It’s like a song, Doctor,” Rose whispered as they looked around the planet, trying to figure out where it was coming from.

He nodded absently, then pointed. “Over there,” he said as he took off.

Rose skidded to a halt and clapped her hands over her mouth when they nearly stumbled over an Ood, partially covered by the fresh snow.

“What is it?” Donna asked.

The Doctor pulled a stethoscope out of his pocket as he got down on the ground beside it. “An Ood. He’s called an Ood.”
Donna stared, looking half awed, half horrified. “But its face.”

“Donna, don’t,” the Doctor ordered tersely. “Not now. It’s a he, not an it. Give me a hand.”

Rose sank down into the snow beside him. “What do you need, Doctor?” Cold, wet snow soaked through the knees of her jeans almost immediately, but she ignored it.

“I don’t know where the heart is,” the Doctor said as he moved the bell of the stethoscope around over the Ood’s chest. “I don’t know if he’s got a heart.” He glanced at Rose. “Talk to him, keep him going.”

To everyone’s surprise, it was Donna who spoke first. She’d gotten down into the snow with them after the Doctor had snapped at her. Her voice trembled at first, but gradually gained strength as she grappled with not only meeting her first alien race on an alien planet, but also the fact that the Ood was dying.

“It’s all right, we’ve got you,” she murmured. “Um, what’s your name?”

The translator ball lit up, and the Ood spoke in a hoarse whisper. “Designated Ood Delta Fifty.”

Donna bit her lip, then picked up the translator ball and spoke directly into it. “My name’s Donna.”

Rose pulled it gently out of her hand. “It’s okay, Donna. You don’t need to talk into it. He can understand you just fine.”

Donna blushed. “Sorry. Oh, God.”

“S’all right.” Rose patted the Ood’s shoulder. “This is the Doctor,” she said soothingly. “We’re gonna get you patched up, good as new. All right?”

Ood Delta Fifty’s head lolled towards her, and Rose wondered if he knew she was lying.

“You’ve been shot,” the Doctor stated clearly.

The translator ball lit up, and Ood Delta Fifty took a rasping breath. “The circle…”

Donna held her hands up and shook her head, then reached up and pushed a strand of hair out of her face. “No, don’t try to talk.”

“The circle must be broken,” he grunted.

The Doctor tilted his head and stared at the Ood. “Circle? What do you mean? Delta Fifty, what circle? Delta Fifty? What circle?”

The nearly unresponsive Ood suddenly sat bolt upright, his eyes blazing red. Rose yelled and scrambled back, dragging the Doctor and Donna with her. Those red eyes still haunted her nightmares some nights.

But that outburst must have been his last gasp, because as quickly as he’d arisen, he collapsed back against the snow, his eyes closed.

“He’s gone.” Donna pulled free of the Rose’s hold and knelt down in the snow.

“Careful,” the Doctor and Rose said in unison.

Donna ignored them and bent over the prone body. Wind whipped over the ridge as she stroked the
bald head. “There you are, sweetheart. We were too late.” She looked back up at them. “What do we do? Do we bury him?”

The Doctor shook his head. “The snow’ll take care of that.”

She sat back on her haunches. “Who was he? What’s an Ood?”

“They’re slaves,” Rose spat out. “Subjugated by humans in the forty-second century.”

The Doctor shoved the stethoscope back into his coat pocket. “Mildly telepathic. That was the song. It was his mind calling out.”

Donna looked down at Ood Delta Fifty. “I couldn’t hear anything.” She stood up. “He sang as he was dying,” she murmured sadly.

“Doctor, his eyes turned red,” Rose said urgently.

Donna looked from her to the Doctor and back again. “What’s that mean?”

“Trouble. Come on,” the Doctor said, leading the way away from the body.

They walked a few yards in silence, their footsteps crunching through the snow as the wind whistled around their ears. “You’ve met the Ood before?” Donna asked as they walked down a hill.

Rose shivered and pulled her coat tighter around her waist. “Yeah,” she confirmed. Events and people she hadn’t thought of in almost four years came back to her with stunning clarity—the look on Jefferson’s face when he’d chosen to stay behind and hold the Ood off, her fear when Ida had told her the Doctor was gone, the red light in Toby’s eyes on the rocket, just before she’d shot the window out.

“Yeah,” she repeated. “We were on a sanctuary base—deep space exploration—and the humans there had Ood with them.”

Donna hit an icy patch and slid a few steps. When she had her feet under her again, she asked, “Well, what are they like?”

The Doctor picked up the story as they circled a frozen pond. “The Ood are harmless. They’re completely benign. Except, the last time we met them, there was this force, like a stronger mind, powerful enough to take them over.”

“What sort of force?” Donna asked.

The Doctor shrugged. “Oh, long story.”

“Long walk,” she pointed out.

“It was the Devil.” Huh. Not such a long story after all.

Donna half turned towards him and glared at him as they walked. “If you’re going to take the mickey, I’ll just put my hood back up.”

Rose shook her head. “No, seriously Donna. We were on a planet orbiting a black hole, and we met the Devil.”

Donna stared, then shook her head and snorted. “I never know what to think with the two of you. I mean, I know you’re telling the truth, but how am I supposed to believe things like that? You sound
barmy, you know that, right?’”

The Doctor ignored their conversation, focused on the Ood’s red eyes. “Must be something different this time, though,” he mumbled to himself. “Something closer to home.”

He crawled to the top of a hill and peered down into the valley below—a very obviously occupied valley. “Ah ha! Civilisation.” He grinned at Rose and Donna. “Fancy a bit of infiltration?”

“Oh, yes.” Rose took his hand and pulled him over the rise. “Come on, Donna!” she called out as they started down the hill toward the fenced in compound.

The gate to the compound was guarded, but the Doctor could see a group of business people gathered on the other side of the fence, near a large building. “Sorry!” he told the guard as he pulled out his psychic paper. “Running a bit late, but it looks like there’s still time, though.”

The guard barely looked at the psychic paper. “Three more buyers for Solana,” he muttered, typing something into his tally for the day. “Go on through.”

The gate swung open, and as they jogged past tall, white buildings, they could hear a woman giving an introductory speech. “Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the Ood Sphere. And isn’t it bracing? Here are your information packs, with vouchers, 3D tickets, and a map of the complex. My name’s Solana, Head of Marketing. I’m sure we’ve all spoken on the vidfone. Now, if you’d like to follow me.”

“Sorry, sorry, sorry,” the Doctor rambled as they jumped to the front of the group. “Late. Don’t mind us. Hello. The guards let us through.”

Her brow furrowed, and she looked them over sceptically. “And you would be?”

Rose held out her psychic paper with one hand while shaking the woman’s hand with the other. “Rose Tyler and Donna Noble of Tyler and Noble, Intergalactic.” She closed the leather wallet and slid it back into her pocket, then half-turned and gestured at the Doctor. “And this is our science advisor—”

“Doctor John Tyler,” he said, grabbing the woman’s hand and shaking it firmly.

The woman pasted a fake smile to her face. “Must have fallen off my list. My apologies. Won’t happen again. Now then, Doctor Tyler, Mrs. Tyler, Miss Noble if you’d like to come with me. And here are your information packs, vouchers inside,” she said as she handed Rose a fat folder. Then she raised her arm and gestured for the entire group. “Now if you’d like to come with me, the Executive Suites are nice and warm.”

The Doctor, Rose, and Donna were the first to the door, but as they started to go inside, a klaxon sounded in the complex. “Oh, what’s that?” the Doctor asked, looking around. “That sounds like an alarm.”

“Oh, it’s just a siren for the end of the work shift,” Solana said, but her tight smile didn’t reach her eyes. She raised her voice so the whole group could hear her and gestured towards the door. “Now then, this way, quick as you can.”

The warmth inside was a welcome relief after the below zero temperature outdoors. Rose untied her scarf and unbuttoned her coat as they were led through the facility to a posh conference room. A courtesy attendant at the back of the room took their coats for them.

Ood milled about carrying trays of drinks while others stood on pedestals like they were a product on
display. Businessmen in expensive suits stood in front of the pedestals, inspecting the Ood like merchandise. Solana’s buyers, she realised, remembering what the guard had said when they’d arrived.

Doctor…

He squeezed her hand. I know, Rose.

Solana stood behind a podium at the front of the room. “As you can see, the Ood are happy to serve, and we keep them in facilities of the highest standard. Here at the Double O”—She smirked at the crowd—“that’s Ood Operations—we like to think of the Ood as our trusted friends.”

Right, because you always make your friends wait on you hand and foot, do you? Rose retorted silently, watching as the other buyers wandered the room, examining the Ood on display like people looked at clothes on shop dummies.

“We keep the Ood healthy, safe, and educated.”

Rose rolled her eyes; it was just like Danny all over again, claiming the Ood wanted to serve, that it was what made them happy.

“We don’t just breed the Ood,” Solana continued. “We make them better. Because at heart, what is an Ood, but a reflection of us? If your Ood is happy, then you’ll be happy, too.”

The entire speech absolutely sickened Rose—the superiority of it, the way Solana spoke of a sentient species as obviously being less-than. But even worse was the way the crowd just ate it up, breaking into applause when she finished.

“Let’s see what we’ve got in here,” the Doctor murmured, opening up the information packet they’d been handed upon their arrival. The top sheet was a schedule, followed by a map of the facility, with stars over the dining and accommodations areas. He tucked the map into his pocket and ignored the schedule, then pulled out the next thing.

“Is that…” Donna whispered as she looked at it over his shoulder.

“Price list,” he confirmed, his voice tight. The last time they’d met the Ood, he’d spent most of the adventure trapped beneath the planet’s surface. He hadn’t really had time to think about what the Ood were and how they were being treated—though he did remember thinking the humans were being far too cavalier with another species’ telepathy.

But this… He glanced up at Rose, whose jaw was set. Stay calm, he urged her.

Calm? How can… this is… Doctor!

I know. But if you slap Solana like you’re thinking, we’ll get kicked out and it’ll be a lot harder for us to free the Ood.

Rose took a deep breath. We are gonna free them, then?

Oh, yes.

The Doctor watched Solana expertly navigate the crowds of buyers, offering a word here and a smile there to make them feel special and appreciated. She stopped by one of the display models—he rubbed his hand over his mouth to hide a snarl at the notion—and cleared her throat to get everyone’s attention.
“I’d now like to point out a new innovation from Ood Operations. We’ve introduced a variety package with the Ood translator ball. You can now have the standard setting.” She looked over her shoulder at the Ood directly behind her. “How are you today, Ood?”

The Ood picked up his translator ball, and it glowed as it translated his telepathic thought to voice. “I’m perfectly well, thank you.”

Solana nodded, then moved on to the next Ood. “Or perhaps after a stressful day, a little something for the gentlemen,” she suggested to the crowd, before looking at the Ood. “And how are you, Ood?”

The Ood fluttered his lashless eyelids at her. “All the better for seeing you,” he said in a flirtatious female voice, eliciting titters of laughter from the crowd. The sexism of it nearly made the Doctor almost as sick as the absolute wrongness of what had been done.

“And the comedy classic option,” Solana said as she moved on to the last Ood. “Ood, you dropped something,” she told him.

“D’oh.”

The Doctor, Rose, and Donna were apparently the only ones that didn’t find the Homer Simpson impersonation hilarious, because that got even more laughter than the seductive voice.

Solana smiled and faced the crowd of buyers. “All that for only five additional credits. The details are in your brochures. Now, there’s plenty more food and drink, so don’t hold back.”

The Doctor heard a low growl beside him that was quickly cut off, and he glanced over at Rose. I can’t… It’s like they just… just go in and stitch a new personality on! she railed.

Rose was shaking, and the Doctor shifted to stand behind her and rested his hands on her shoulders. She resisted his attempt to calm her down for a few seconds, but then he felt her sigh, and her angry tremors stopped.

They watched Solana leave. I’m pretty sure that’s exactly what they do, the Doctor agreed. Some sort of… lobotomy, brain surgery… They’re talking about programming a sentient species, and that’s never acceptable.

Solana left, and Donna was nowhere to be seen. The Doctor realised belatedly that she must have gone in search of the promised food and drink. He shrugged and put a hand on Rose’s back, directing her towards the front of the room. “Let’s see where we are,” he suggested as he tapped a few buttons on the computer terminal.

Donna joined them with a drink in hand just as he pulled the map of the system up. The Doctor scanned the nearby stars, trying to find something familiar. When he found it, he nodded—of course.

“Ah, got it. The Ood Sphere. I’ve been to this solar system before. Years ago. Ages. Close to the planet Sense Sphere. Let’s widen out.”

He tapped at a few more buttons on the terminal, and the system map zoomed out to a galactic map. Rose stepped forward and stared at the star charts, her arms crossed over her chest.

“The year 4126,” the Doctor said. “That is the Second Great and Bountiful Human Empire,” he explained as important systems were highlighted on the map.
Donna had her drink to her lips, but her eyes widened and she lowered it as she stared at the map. “4126?” she repeated. “It’s 4126. I’m in 4126.”

“It’s good, isn’t it?” the Doctor said, grinning at her.

Donna nodded at the map. “What’s the Earth like now?”

“Bit full,” the Doctor told her. “But you see, the Empire stretches out across three galaxies.”

“It’s weird. I mean, it’s brilliant, but. Back home, the papers and the telly, they keep saying we haven’t got long to live. Global warming, flooding, all the bees disappearing.”

“Yeah.” The Doctor had forgotten she’d mentioned the bees before, and it struck him just as strange this time as it had in London. “That thing about the bees is odd.”

“But look at us.” Donna nodded at the map. “We’re everywhere. Is that good or bad, though? I mean, are we like explorers? Or more like a virus?”

“Sometimes I wonder,” the Doctor admitted. As much as he loved humans, there were times—like right now—when their ubiquitous presence throughout the universe did more harm than good.

Rose had been studying the chart silently, and she turned around now, her eyes flashing. “Those red dots, those are Ood distribution centres, aren’t they?” she said, her voice low and angry.

The Doctor nodded. “Yeah.”

Donna considered the map for a moment, taking in the red dots Rose had pointed out. She still hadn’t figured out exactly what was going on with the Ood, and for a brief moment, she thought about asking Rose. Then she looked at the other woman, and the fire in her eyes was scarier than any anger she’d ever seen on the Doctor’s face.

Still, that anger answered her lingering doubts. “Across three galaxies? Don’t the Ood get a say in this?” she muttered, feeling her own anger spike. She glanced around and spotted an Ood standing only a few yards away. “Um, sorry, but”—The Ood didn’t look at her until she tapped him on the arm.—“Hello. Tell me, are you all like this?”

The translator ball lit up. “I do not understand, Miss,” he said, his voice placid.

Donna recoiled. “Why do you say Miss? Do I look single?”

Rose tapped her elbow. “Not the point, Donna,” she muttered.

Donna nodded her head quickly. “Yeah. What I mean is, are there any free Ood? Are there Ood running wild somewhere, like wildebeest?” she asked, thinking of the times she’d watched *Wild Africa* with her granddad.

The Ood cocked his head and pressed the button on the translator ball. “All Ood are born to serve. Otherwise, we would die.”

A frown wrinkled Donna’s forehead. “But you can’t have started like that. Before the humans, what were you like?”

A strange shudder ran through the Ood. “The circle.”

The Doctor jumped into the conversation. Ood Delta Fifty had mentioned a circle, right before he’d died. “What do you mean? What circle?”
“The circle.” The Ood shook his head and tried again. “The circle is—”

Solana’s voice interrupted their conversation before the Ood could finish the thought. “Ladies and gentlemen. All Ood to hospitality stations, please.”

“I’ve had enough of the schmoozing,” the Doctor said as the Ood filed away and the humans followed Solana. He put away his glasses and pulled the map out of his pocket. “Do you fancy going off the beaten track?”

He waved the map at Donna and Rose, and they both grinned.

“Rough guide to the Ood Sphere?” Donna said, excitement humming in her voice.

Rose nodded curtly. “Works for me.” She spun around and led the way back to the coat check.

The Doctor lengthened his stride and caught up with her at the back of the line. All the other buyers were getting their coats, too.

He took Rose’s hand in his, and she looked up at him, a questioning furrow between her eyebrows. The Doctor knew she’d picked up on the pride he couldn’t contain, and he smiled down at her.

*Your compassion always amazes me,* he explained as they reached the front of the line.

Rose blushed, then handed their tickets to the waiting attendant. A moment later, he returned with their three coats, and they moved off to the side to put them on.

The Doctor looked over at Donna when they were bundled up again. “So, Donna Noble,” he said quietly, “are you ready to do something potentially dangerous and certainly against the rules?”

Her eyes sparkled with excitement, though there was a decent amount of righteous anger there, too. “Oh, yeah,” she whispered.

“Then follow me.”

The Doctor waited to make his move until Solana led the group out of the reception area across the snow towards a warehouse. They hung back from the crowd, then ducked down a different lane that led to a high, barbed wire fence. He used his sonic to break through a gate, and they slunk through, taking care to be inconspicuous.

A voice over the loudspeaker announced that Ood shift eight was commencing as they slipped down a narrow path between buildings. Unlike the public, business side of the compound on the other side of the fence, this part of Ood Operations was industrial, with buildings made out of corrugated steel. Enclosed conveyor belts overhead gave it a closed in, claustrophobic feel, while also shielding them somewhat from the wind and snow.

The Doctor spotted a staircase and took them two at a time. A moment later, they had a prime perch to look down into the main working part of the compound, where Ood were being led through in straight lines.

One Ood stumbled and fell out of line, and they watched as a guard approached it. “Get up,” the human ordered, but the Ood didn’t move. “I said get up.”

Donna recoiled when he cracked his whip. “You were right, Rose,” Donna said. “They’re slaves. Up there, in the conference room, I knew this was wrong. But this is more than just…”
“Get up!” The guard cracked his whip again, and the Ood slowly got to his feet. “March.”

The Doctor’s jaw was set, a muscle twitching. “Last time… was it this bad, Rose? You saw them more than I did.”

Rose shook her head. “No, Danny and the others were definitely idiots, but at least they treated the Ood with some respect.” Her eyes glinted. “Except for wanting to use Strategy Nine. They were just going to hide away in the rocket and then open all the airlocks and shoot the Ood out into space.”

The Doctor nodded. “We only managed to save fifteen Ood last time, and we didn’t really do anything to stop the slave trade. I reckon we owe them one—what do you think, Rose?”

Rose nodded and took his hand. “Absolutely. Let’s do this.”

A man in a suit walked through the compound, trailed by two other people. “That looks like the boss,” Donna pointed out.

The Doctor nodded. “Let’s keep out of his way. Come on.” He put on his glasses and pulled the map out of his pocket. After peering at it for a moment, he led them away from the group of businessmen. “There should be a cargo facility here somewhere… that would be a good place to start our liberation of the Ood.”

They ducked through alleyways, taking care to avoid any personnel. “It should be here somewhere,” the Doctor muttered, turning the map a different direction.

Donna watched as the Doctor and Rose both walked right by a door. She shook her head, then put her fingers to her lips and whistled.

The Doctor ducked, then he and Rose spun around and jogged over to her. “Where’d you learn to whistle?” he asked.

Donna smiled and stood out of the way so he could open the door. “West Ham, every Saturday.”

The door opened, and they walked into an enormous cargo facility, filled with row after row of blue shipping containers, stacked two high.

“Ood export,” the Doctor said. He pointed at a giant claw dangling from the ceiling, and as he did, it moved to hover over a container and picked it up. “You see? Lifts up the containers, takes them to the rocket sheds, ready to be flown out all over the three galaxies.”

Donna’s steps faltered, and she looked up at him. “What, you mean, these containers are full of…?” She couldn’t bring herself to finish the sentence.

“I can’t decide if I want to be sick, or scream,” Rose muttered.

The Doctor rubbed her back. “Let’s stop this, then you can do both if you’d like.” He looked around the warehouse. “I honestly had no idea. When you told me about the Ood back on Krop Tor, Rose, I didn’t realise it was this bad.”

Rose’s face was green, but her eyes were flinty. “Neither did I.”

He used the sonic screwdriver to break the lock of the nearest cargo container, and Donna gasped when the door swung open. Rows of Ood stood waiting to be carried to the rockets, their faces as blank of personality as the ones they’d see in the conference room earlier.
The smell hit her nose a moment later, and she recoiled, wrinkling her nose in disgust. “Oh, it stinks.”

“How many?” Rose asked, her voice hoarse.

“Hundred?” the Doctor suggested, anger throbbing low in his voice. “More?”

Rose sucked in a breath. “In every one of these containers. That’s… thousands, in this room right now.”

Donna remembered the map they’d seen earlier, and her lip curled in a snarl. “A great big empire built on slavery.”

The Doctor looked over at her. “It’s not so different from your time.”

“Oi, I haven’t got slaves,” she protested sharply.

Staring at the cargo container filled with living beings, the Doctor wasn’t of a mind to be gentle with his approach to history. “Who do you think made your clothes?”

Rose elbowed him, and he looked down at her. “Rude,” she chastised, her brown eyes dark with reproof.

He tugged at his ear and glanced over at Donna. “Sorry.”

That was apparently not enough of an apology for Donna. “Is that why you travel round with a human at your side?” she demanded. “Not so you can show them the wonders of the universe, but so you can take cheap shots?”

The Doctor swallowed hard. “Yeah, I shouldn’t have said that. I’m honestly sorry, Donna.”

She sighed and nodded, then looked at the Ood. “I don’t understand. The door is open—why don’t you just run away?”

An Ood at the front of the container tilted his head and held up the translator ball. “For what reason?”

Rose huffed. “Well, you could be free,” she pointed out, agreeing with Donna. Why didn’t they run? She had a sick feeling the answer was not going to make her happy.

The Ood blinked a few times. “I do not understand the concept.”

“What is it with that Persil ball?” Donna asked. The Doctor raised his eyebrows in question, and Donna rolled her eyes. “I mean, they’re not born with it, are they?” she pointed out. “Why do they have to be all plugged in?”

“Ood, tell me,” the Doctor said. “Does the circle mean anything to you?”

Rose’s telepathy hummed, and she was unsurprised when every translator ball in the container lit up.

“The circle must be broken,” the Ood chanted.

“Oh, that is creepy,” Donna whispered.

The Doctor shook his head. “But what is it? What is the circle?”
“The circle must be broken,” they repeated.

Rose shivered; the unison bit was bringing back bad memories, but she refused to let that experience with the Ood colour the way she saw the entire species. “Why?” she asked.

Every head tilted slightly so they were all looking at her. “So that we can sing.”

A faint sound of music hummed along the edges of Rose’s awareness, and she realised it had been getting stronger as they’d talked to the Ood about the circle. The Doctor nodded slightly, and she knew he could hear it, too.

An alarm sounded, a discordant note that did not harmonise with the singing she could hear in her head.

The Doctor spun around. “Oh, that’s us. Come on,” he told her and Donna, pulling them both out of the cargo container.

They raced through the stacks of cargo containers, and Rose tried not to think about how many Ood they were running past as they searched for an exit.

She and Donna spotted the door at the same moment and skidded to a halt. Donna called out for the Doctor, but Rose reached for him over the bond.

We found a door.

She’d barely completed the thought when the door opened and a group of armed guards ran into the warehouse. “Don’t move!” they ordered as they pointed their guns at Rose and Donna. “Stay where you are.”

Too bad it was guarded, Rose added for the Doctor’s sake. She felt him spin around and run towards her and shook her head quickly. Don’t. If they didn’t shoot on sight, I bet they’ll lock us up somewhere. Wait and come rescue us.

He struggled with that for a second, but when the guards grabbed her and Donna and dragged them off, he reluctantly started running again.

Rose went relatively peacefully, knowing there was a backup plan in place.

Donna… not so much. “Get off me. Get off me!” she yelled, dragging her heels, probably in an effort to give the Doctor time to rescue them.

The guard who’d whipped the Ood earlier seemed to be the one in charge. He watched as Rose and Donna were dragged to a cargo container filled with Ood. “Keep them in there for now,” he ordered as they were shoved inside. The door slammed shut, leaving them in semi-darkness.

Rose helped Donna to her feet, then leaned back against the door. She could get them out with her screwdriver, but this was a safe place to hide until the Doctor took care of the rest of the guards.

“Can you help us?” Donna asked the Ood.

One slowly lifted its head, and Rose’s opinion about staying in the cargo container suddenly changed when she saw the red eyes. She cursed under her breath and reached into her coat pocket for her sonic, while Donna pressed her back up against the door.

I’m getting us out of here, she told the Doctor.
“Oh, no, you don’t,” Donna insisted. “What have we done? We’re not part of that lot. We’re on your side. Stay where you are. That’s an order. I said, stay. Why isn’t that door open yet, Rose?”

Rose stiffened and nearly dropped the sonic when the Doctor’s adrenaline spiked and she realised he was being chased by something worse than a few guards. She ground her teeth together and clenched her fingers around the device, managing to hold it steady long enough to get the door open.

“Come on, Donna,” she muttered. “And shush,” she added, not wanting to draw attention with raised voices. “We’ve got to go rescue the Doctor.”

As he turned a corner, the Doctor glanced over and realised he’d lost Rose and Donna. He skidded to a halt and looked around, his breath coming a little faster than usual.

Where are you?

We found a door. He grinned and turned around to join them, but almost immediately, she added, Too bad it was guarded.

Ahead of him, he could hear guards and Donna shouting, and he groaned. His instincts told him to dart out and grab Rose, but from the sounds of struggle he could hear, it wouldn’t be that easy of a rescue.

Still, he’d taken three steps in Rose’s direction before he felt her very firmly tell him to stop. Don’t. If they didn’t shoot on sight, I bet they’ll lock us up somewhere. Wait and come rescue us.

The Doctor raked a hand through his hair. The possibility of Rose being shot—Donna too—didn’t really make him want to play a waiting game. But she had a point.

Right, the Doctor told himself. Time to run aimlessly around the warehouse, not letting on that I know exactly where Rose and Donna are.

He started running again, then when he realised no one was pursuing him, he slowed to a walk. No point in getting further away from where they were being held than necessary, after all.

Actually… He looked around uneasily. Why wasn’t he being followed?

A mechanical whirring drew his attention upward, and he groaned when he saw the claw coming his way. Then he started running again, making it chase him.

He ran in a wide circle around the general area where Rose and Donna were. Rose was trying to stay calm, but she’d tensed a moment ago, and he didn’t want to wander far, if it turned out she needed him.

I’m getting us out of here, she told him a moment later.

He relaxed for a moment when she told him that, and then the claw slammed into the floor right behind him, giving him a burst of speed.

The Doctor careened around a corner, caroming off the side of a cargo container and down the next aisle. No matter how fast he ran, the claw was right behind him. The operator must have a bird’s-eye view of the room, because the Doctor should have been able to get away by now.

The Doctor heard the claw plunging down over his head, and he tucked and rolled, just barely avoiding being caught. He leapt to his feet and kept running, but when he turned the next corner, his luck ran out. Fifty gallon drums formed a barrier in the middle of the aisle, and though he tried to
leap over them, he didn’t have the necessary speed to gain height.

He tumbled through the barrels and landed on his back, completely winded by the fall. He watched through wide eyes as the claw came down on him… then stopped, ten feet above his head.

Before he could process the near miss, Rose and Donna charged around a corner, their eyes wild. They each took one of his hands and pulled him to his feet.

“Run!” Rose yelled as she pushed him down an aisle.

“The guards are gone,” the Doctor protested.

“I don’t care about the guards,” she retorted. “We were in a cargo container with red-eyed Ood. They’ll be out now.”

As if to prove her point, screams echoed throughout the warehouse as the Ood found the guards who had returned, presumably to take the Doctor, Rose, and Donna into custody.

“Right,” the Doctor agreed. “Let’s go.”

They found the door and raced out into the biting cold. When the Doctor looked over his shoulder, he was only a little surprised to see Solana. They got as far as the next building before he let them stop to catch their breath.

Solana bent over, her shoulders heaving, and Donna glared at her.

“If people back on Earth knew what was going on here…”

She stood up and rolled her eyes. “Oh, don’t be so stupid. Of course they know.”

“They know you keep living creatures in cargo containers?” Rose demanded. “That you have them whipped when they’re too exhausted to work?”

Solana shrugged. “They don’t ask. Same thing.”

The Doctor stepped in before Donna and Rose could tear her apart for that. “Solana, the Ood aren’t born like this. They can’t be,” he said, zeroing in on the one thing that had always bothered him about the Ood. “A species born to serve could never evolve in the first place. What does the company do to make them obey?”

She drew herself up indignantly. “That’s nothing to do with me.”

The Doctor raised his eyebrows. “Oh, what, because you don’t ask?” he countered, flinging her own accusation right back at her.

She swallowed and looked down at the ground. “That’s Dr. Ryder’s territory.”

“She’s he?” The Doctor pulled his map out of his pocket. “What part of the complex?” Solana hesitated, and he shoved the map at her. “I could help with the red eye. Now show me,” he demanded.

She pointed. “There. Beyond the red section.”

“Come with me,” the Doctor offered. She’d been willing to give this much help; maybe she’d take that chance he always gave his enemies. And it could be useful having a company employee with them. “You’ve seen the warehouse. You can’t agree with all this. You know this place better than
me. You could help.”

They stared at each for a long moment, the Doctor inviting, Solana considering. For a moment, he thought he’d won her over, but he saw the moment her eyes hardened.

She looked over his shoulder, and he realised they’d forgotten that guards would be looking for them. “They’re over here! Guards! They’re over here.”

“Next time you get all sanctimonious with the people of Earth who don’t ask questions,” Rose snarled, “remember that you know, and you still chose to side with slavery.”
Guards chased after Rose, the Doctor, and Donna as they ran through the complex, but above the shouting and feet stomping on the hard pavement, Rose heard something else. *Singing.*

She grabbed the Doctor’s arm and held a hand to her lips when he tried to pull away. “Shhh. Don’t you hear it, Doctor?”

He tilted his head for a moment, then a smile spread across his face. “Oh, you’re brilliant, Rose.” He took her hand, then looked over at Donna, who was frowning at the both of them. “Come on, Donna, this way!”

They followed the song to another metal building, and Rose sonicked the door open. The three of them filed inside, then she watched with raised eyebrows as the Doctor turned his sonic on the lock, frying the mechanism.

“How on. Does that mean we’re locked in?” Donna demanded.

“Listen.” He held up a hand. “Listen, listen, listen, listen.”

Rose and the Doctor both set their sonic screwdrivers to the torch setting and followed the sound of singing deeper into the facility.

The song grew louder as they walked down a metal staircase, and when they reached the bottom, they paused and put a hand to their heads. “My head’s killing me,” Rose muttered.

“Yeah,” the Doctor said, his voice raspy.

“What is it?” Donna put her hand on Rose’s shoulder, and looked at her and the Doctor.

“The Ood.” Rose rubbed at her temple. After almost four years of practice, her telepathic barriers were adequate to keep most chatter out. But the Ood… “They’re singing telepathically. It’s… haunting. And really, really loud.”

The Doctor shone the torchlight around the room, and they all sucked in a breath when they realised they were surrounded by cages. He walked slowly to a switch and turned the lights on.

Cages full of Ood.

They stared into one cage, and the captive Ood trembled and slowly turned their backs to them. The implication of an entire group of Ood cowering at the sight of humans horrified Rose.

“The only humans they’ve ever met have been cruel,” she whispered.

Staring at the cages, Donna wondered why she’d thought it would be a good idea to travel with the Doctor and Rose. First Pompeii, and now an entire species, enslaved. “They look different to the others,” she said.

The Ood seemed to be aware they were being discussed, because they shifted again. They were still squatting on the floor, holding something protectively inside their cupped hands, but they weren’t turned completely away from them anymore.

The three of them knelt down in front of the cage and looked through the bars at the Ood.
“That’s because they’re natural born Ood,” the Doctor explained, “unprocessed, before they’re adapted to slavery. Unspoilt.” He took a breath, and when he spoke again, she could hear tears in his voice. “That’s their song.”

Donna shook her head. They kept talking about a song. “I can’t hear it.”

In her peripheral vision, Donna saw the Doctor turn to look at her. “Do you want to?” he offered quietly.

Donna looked at the Ood, then at the Doctor and Rose. “Yeah.”

“It’ll make you cry, Donna,” Rose warned, wiping tears away from her eyes as she did.

She swallowed hard, then looked at the Doctor. “Let me hear it.”

“Face me.”

Donna turned to face the Doctor, and he closed his eyes and pressed his hands to her temples. A moment later, she felt something brushing against her mind, and she shuddered at the sensation.

“Open your mind,” he instructed.

She didn’t have a clue what that meant, but she closed her eyes and forced herself to relax into the pressure, rather than fighting against it.

“That’s it,” the Doctor whispered. “Hear it, Donna. Hear the music.”

Donna’s head filled with the haunting sound of a single voice rising and falling, like the descant of a Gregorian chant. When Rose told her the song was sad, she hadn’t realised that meant she’d be able to feel the overwhelming sorrow of an entire species in captivity, separated from each other in a way that was never meant to be.

She pulled back from the Doctor’s hands, but whatever he’d done to let her hear the song didn’t go away when she broke physical contact with him. A sob got stuck in her throat as the mournful song echoed around her.

Donna looked at the Ood in the cage, seeing them with new eyes. Hearing how sad they were gave her compassion for them a depth it had been missing earlier. This captivity was truly destroying their lives. One of the Ood looked directly at her, and suddenly the shared sorrow of the species narrowed down to this individual.

Her eyes filled with tears, and she looked up at the Doctor. “Take it away,” she sobbed.

His eyes were sad, but understanding. “Sure?”

The song swelled, as the Ood seemed to sense her sadness on their behalf and add it to their lament.

Donna nodded frantically. “I can’t bear it.”

The Doctor pressed his fingers to her temples again, and the song was gone. Donna sniffed and swallowed back her remaining tears before swiping at her face, trying to regain some composure.

A hand on her shoulder surprised her, but when Rose offered a one-armed hug, she accepted it gratefully. “I’m sorry,” she whispered, not sure if she was talking to the Doctor and Rose, or to the Ood, who could never get away from the song.
Rose squeezed her shoulder, then stepped away. “It’s okay.”

Donna took a deep breath and looked into the cage. The Ood looked just as dejected, as downtrodden as they had a moment ago, even though she could no longer hear the song. “But you can still hear it,” she said, not sure if she was talking to her friends, or to the Ood.

“Yeah,” Rose whispered hoarsely. “An’ it hurts.”

“All the time,” the Doctor agreed, taking Rose’s hand.

Donna watched them for a long moment, taking in the way they comforted each other in this shared sorrow. Her curious side was still intrigued by the hints of telepathy she saw in their relationship, but the pragmatic side could only see the resigned acceptance in their eyes. This wasn’t new for them.

All the beauty, all the incredible things she’d imagined seeing if she got to travel with them… she never imagined this. Never imagined that she would have to help kill twenty thousand people to save the planet, never imagined that in two thousand years, humanity had still not gotten past its need to enslave those it believed to be less than themselves.

The now-familiar buzz of the sonic screwdriver pulled her out of her thoughts. When she shook off her melancholy, the Doctor already had the cell door open.

But Donna heard something else, something coming from above. Something that sounded like bolt cutters. “They’re breaking in.”

“Ah, let them.” The Doctor threw the door back and walked slowly into the cell. The song still playing in his head made him reckless—he wanted that confrontation with the management of this company.

The Ood huddled in a corner, and he realised they were picking up on his anger but couldn’t tell who it was directed at. He took a deep breath and started to crouch down in front of them, but Rose was already there, kneeling on the floor with her empty hands held out, palm up.

One Ood raised his head and made eye contact, and Rose smiled at it. “It’s all right,” she said, her gentle voice a counterpoint to the banging coming from above. “We’re not going to hurt you. We’re here to help, if we can.”

Their hunched shoulders relaxed slightly as she projected a solid wave of compassion, and Rose’s smile widened a bit. “Will you show us what you’re holding?” she asked. “You can trust us. I’m Rose, and this is the Doctor and Donna. We’re your friends.”

The Doctor watched breathlessly as the Ood shuffled forward, still keeping whatever he had in his hand covered protectively. But when he reached Rose, he carefully removed his top hand.

They all stared at the pale pink, fleshy sphere the Ood held in his hand. “Is that…?” Donna whispered.

The Doctor nodded as the mystery of the blank personality of the Ood suddenly made sense. “It’s a brain. A hindbrain. The Ood are born with a secondary brain.” Now he could see a fleshy cord connecting the brain to the Ood’s head, just below the tentacles on the face. “Like the amygdala in humans, it processes memory and emotions. You get rid of that, you wouldn’t be Donna any more. You’d be… like an Ood. A processed Ood.”

Tension radiated off of Rose, but she was trying to control it, to not alarm the Ood. “They cut off their brains, and stitch on the translator,” she said, her voice flat.
“Like a lobotomy,” Donna agreed. The Doctor looked over at her, and his hearts sank at the disillusionment on her face. “I spent all that time looking for the two of you because I thought it was so wonderful out here.” She shook her head. “I want to go home.”

He wanted to argue, but a final, loud bang indicated that the door had finally been opened. He spun around and saw a guard leading the same businessman they’d spotted earlier down the stairs.

“They’re with the Ood, sir,” the guard said.

The Doctor jumped to his feet and pulled the door shut with a hard clang of metal on metal. “What you going to do, then?” he snarled, his chest heaving with rage. “Arrest me? Lock me up? Throw me in a cage? Well, you’re too late. Ha!”

The businessman rolled his eyes. “I don’t know how three idiots managed to infiltrate this far into the facility,” he muttered as he gestured for the guard to unlock the cage. Which… yes, it should have occurred to the Doctor that they would have keys, but honestly, he was only trying to make a clear statement at the time.

“What should we do with them, sir?” the guard asked. The Doctor was relieved to see that he kept his gun trained on him, though his gaze did wander to Rose and Donna frequently, keeping an eye on all of them.

“Bring them to the office,” the man said. He smiled coolly at the three of them. “I’d recommend that you follow without any protests or attempts at heroism. It would be a shame if Kess here fired accidentally.”

The barrel of Kess’ gun shifted from the Doctor to Rose. The Doctor’s jaw clenched. “Mr…. What was your name?”

“Halpen,” the businessman said.

“Excellent. Mr. Halpen, I think you’ll find that we’ll come peacefully enough. There’s no need to point weapons at anyone.”

A sly smirk twisted Halpen’s mouth. “Kess, keep your gun trained on Mrs. Tyler. If any of them try to escape, shoot her.”

The Doctor clenched his hands into fists, and Halpen chuckled. “Oh yes, Dr. Tyler—Solana mentioned that you were married to one of these two ladies. Thank you for offering me the perfect leverage.”

Rose tried to push calm over the bond as she climbed the stairs, but the Doctor wasn’t interested. His anger and rage had been building ever since they’d realised exactly how the Ood were processed, and the threat to her had pushed his temper to the limit.

Outside, she blinked a few times as the glare of the sun off the snow blinded her. “Move along,” Kess growled, poking her in the back with the gun.

Rose stumbled a few steps, then wheeled around and glared at him, which had the dual effect of letting the Doctor see she was absolutely fine. “God, humans can be so thick,” she growled. “If I’m your boss’ leverage, what do you think my husband will do if something happens to me?”

Kess’ gaze shifted to the Doctor, taking in his wild eyes and heaving chest. He took an involuntary step back, and the barrel of the gun swung around to point at the Doctor.
Mr. Halpen rolled his eyes. “Oh, for God’s sake, Kess, be careful. It would be nice if we could all reach the office in one piece—and without any weapons fire to alert the buyers to potential problems. Do you understand?”

Kess nodded slowly, but Rose watched him out of the corner of her eye as they crossed the compound, and noticed that he never really looked away from the Doctor.

The rest of their walk was uneventful. Solana must have kept the buyers occupied so no one noticed three people being led across the compound at gunpoint.

When they reached a sterile, white office, Kess handed them off to other guards and disappeared. Rose, the Doctor, and Donna were all dragged over to some exposed pipes and handcuffed there. Rose tugged at her restraints, but these didn’t seem like the kind that would pop open if you pulled just right.

Halpen leaned against a table as an Ood in a simple black outfit looked on. “Why don’t you just come out and say it?” he demanded. “FOTO activists.”

“Friend of the Ood?” Rose guessed, the long-ago conversation with Danny and Scooti coming back to her. “I was asked that once before, and I’ll say the same thing I did then. Maybe I am—because as far as I’m concerned, humans have no right taking slaves.”

Halpen’s eye twitched and he raised his voice. “The Ood were nothing without us, just animals roaming around on the ice.”

“That’s because you can’t hear them,” the Doctor spat out.

“They welcomed it,” Halpen insisted. He shook his head and chuckled. “It’s not as if they put up a fight.”

“You idiot,” Donna hissed.

The man’s smile disappeared, but Rose watched the Ood standing behind him as Donna delivered a merciless blow to Halpen’s egotism. He’d tilted his head curiously when Donna spoke, and Rose got the sense that he was… intrigued by their outspoken support of his species.

“They’re born with their brains in their hands,” Donna continued. “Don’t you see, that makes them peaceful. They’ve got to be, because a creature like that would have to trust anyone it meets.”

“Oh, nice one,” the Doctor muttered approvingly.

“Thank you.”

Rose agreed with the Doctor’s praise and hoped it would convince Donna to stay with them, but she hadn’t looked away from the Ood. Unless she was wrong—and it was hard to say, given how difficult it was to read an Ood—he was both pleased and grateful for Donna’s scathing rebuttal.

Halpen’s eyes narrowed, then he stood up. He took a few steps forward and tried to intimidate the Doctor into obedience, but the Doctor just straightened his back and looked down his nose at the human.

“The system’s worked for two hundred years,” Halpen said angrily. “All we’ve got is a rogue batch. But the infection is about to be sterilised.” He raised his wrist to his mouth and spoke into a comms unit. “Mr. Kess. How do we stand?”
Kess’ voice filled the office, a tinny, hollow sound. “Canisters primed, sir. As soon as the core heats up, the gas is released. Give it two hundred marks and counting.”

The Doctor sucked in a breath. It was bad enough when the humans had just been enslaving the Ood, but the slaughter he was suggesting now was outright genocide. “You’re going to gas them?”

“Kill the livestock,” Halpen said coldly, a hint a smirk curling the corners of his mouth. “The classic foot and mouth solution from the olden days. Still works.” He chuckled, and the Doctor wanted to smack the smirk right off his face.

The Ood song crescendoed, fear harmonising with the sorrow as anger solidified into a pulsing bass line. The Doctor pressed his tongue to the back of his teeth, biting back a groan of discomfort. They were reaching out for each other, trying to help each other in this moment. They knew they were going to be slaughtered, and they weren’t going to let it happen.

He wasn’t surprised when an alarm blared throughout the complex. The red-eyed Ood were obviously causing enough havoc to cause alarm.

Mr. Halpen had turned around to talk to Dr. Ryder, but he spun back around when the alarm started. “What the hell?”

The two men and the Ood that followed Halpen around left the office through the private, outdoor staircase. They left the doors open, so the Doctor, Rose, and Donna could all hear the gunfire and screams sounding from outside.

_Doctor_. He turned around to look at Rose. _I don’t think Mr. Halpen’s favourite Ood is quite as domesticated as he thinks. It’s just a guess... but that might be a point in our favour, later on._

The Doctor craned his neck in an attempt to see the Ood she was talking about, but they were already out of sight. _Well, we need to get out of here before that can do us any good_, he replied, tugging at his cuffs.

Halpen and his entourage reentered the room a moment later. “Change of plan,” he said curtly.

“There are no reports of trouble off-world, sir,” Dr. Ryder told his boss. “It’s still contained to the Ood Sphere.”

Halpen straightened his spine and stared down at the scientist. “Then we’ve got a public duty to stop it before it spreads.”

“What’s happening?” the Doctor asked, looking at the two men and trying to put together some reasonable course of events.

“Everything you wanted, Doctor,” Halpen said bitterly. “No doubt there’ll be a full police investigation once this place has been sterilised, so I can’t risk a bullet to the head.” He smiled viciously. “I’ll leave you to the mercies of the Ood.”

The Doctor called after him as he left the room. “But Mr. Halpen, there’s something else, isn’t there?” Halpen stopped and looked back at him. “Something we haven’t seen.”

“What do you mean?” asked Donna.

“A creature couldn’t survive with a separate forebrain and hindbrain. They’d be at war with themselves.” Mr. Halpen’s eyes had widened during his explanation, and the Doctor knew he was right. “There’s got to be something else, a third element. Am I right?”
“And again, so clever,” the businessman said condescendingly.

“And that’s where the red eye is coming from, isn’t it?” Rose guessed. “What is it?”

Halpen strode forward and got right in her face. “It won’t exist for very much longer,” he snarled. “Enjoy your Ood.”

The Doctor made eye contact with the Ood before they left the room. Rose was right; there was something in the eyes… He glanced down at the Greek letter printed on the pocket of the Ood’s jumpsuit and made note of his designation: Ood Sigma.

After they were gone, the Doctor let part of his brain ruminate over what Halpen could possibly have meant. Whatever was tying the Ood together, he was planning to destroy it. That would essentially kill any chance they ever had of going back to their natural state.

He tugged again at his handcuffs; they couldn’t let that happen. “Come on,” he grunted when they didn’t give.

“Well, do something,” Donna ordered. “You’re the one with all the tricks. You must have met Houdini.”

On his other side, Rose huffed as she tried to get the restraints open. “Yeah… the thing is, Donna, these are really good handcuffs.”

“Oh well, I’m glad of that,” Donna snarked, and they could hear the eye roll in her voice. “I mean, at least we’ve got quality.”

The door slid open and they froze for a moment when they caught sight of three Ood standing on the other side, their eyes red and their translator balls in their hands. Then Rose panicked and tugged frantically at her cuffs.

A moment later, calm washed over the bond, but Rose shook her head violently.

_They use that thing as a weapon!_ she explained to the Doctor. She shared the memory of watching the young crew woman die when a translator ball had been pressed to her head. The Doctor sucked in a breath, and she nodded quickly.

Then she forced herself to calm down enough to talk to the Ood. They were telepathic; couldn’t they tell the three of them meant them no harm? “We’re here to help,” she insisted as she yanked at her bindings. “You can trust us,” she said, just as she had in the cage with the unprocessed Ood.


Donna jumped into the round a moment later, saying, “The circle must be broken.”

Rose nodded; she’d almost forgotten about the first Ood they’d met, and the way the Ood in the cargo container had repeated that phrase in unison.

“We’re here to help. You can trust us,” she said over and over, while the Doctor and Donna likewise repeated their own phrases. The Ood didn’t seem to understand, though—they kept advancing, with the translator balls held at the ready.

Rose and the Doctor both tried to reach out to the Ood telepathically at the same time. It should be easy, if the species was as telepathic as they seemed to be. But something… something seemed to be blocking the full signal, and all the Ood could do was project emotion.
The circle must be broken, Rose realised, finally getting an idea of what exactly that line meant. The circle was the thing cutting the Ood off from that third brain the Doctor had mentioned—a third brain that let them connect telepathically.

The Ood song swirled around them, and Rose closed her eyes and opened herself up to it. We’re here to help. You can trust us. The circle must be broken, she said, adding the last in there on a random instinct.

The translator balls were only inches from their faces now, and she cringed back from it as far as possible. We’re here to help! Rose cried out telepathically. We’re your friends.

She held her breath when the Ood froze. A moment later, the lights in the translator balls turned off, and as one, the Ood dropped them and clutched their heads, listening to a message. “Friends,” they said a moment later. “Rose, Doctor, Donna. Friends.”

Rose sagged back against the wall, while the Doctor and Donna agreed exuberantly.

“Yes. That’s us. Friends. Oh, yes,” they said, their words spilling out on top of each other chaotically.

The Ood clipped their translator balls to their shirts, and one of them found a set of keys in Mr. Halpen’s desk. “You must hurry,” he said as he unlocked their handcuffs. “The circle must be broken.”

Rose was the first to be released, and she looked at the Ood as she rubbed at her sore wrists. “Thank you… er, what’s your name?”

“Omega Twenty.”

“Thank you, Omega Twenty.” She looked at all of them. “Thank you.”

As soon as he was free, the Doctor grabbed Rose and Donna’s hands and they ran out of the office and down the stairs, straight into a war zone. Guards were firing blindly into the worsening blizzard, trying to kill the Ood.

They hunkered down behind the corner of a building. “I don’t know where it is. I don’t know where they’ve gone.”

“What are we looking for?”

Donna’s question echoed behind him as he took off running again, trusting they would both follow him.

“It might be underground, like some sort of cave, or a cavern, or…” He stopped and spun in a circle, trying to find some clue to where they needed to go.

Rose and Donna ran by him, Rose grabbing his hand as she passed. Come on, Doctor. No time to stand still. Follow the singing.

He’d tried to keep them out of the worst of the fighting, but doing as she said and following the Ood song to its source meant leading them directly into the fray. “Keep your head down!”

The force of an explosion behind them knocked them all to the ground, thankfully covered by a soft blanket of snow. When the vibrations stopped, the Doctor knew, thanks to the bond, that Rose wasn’t in any pain, so he looked over at Donna first.
She nodded shakily, and he rolled onto his side so he could look over his shoulder. The air was filled with smoke, and as it cleared, Ood Sigma appeared. Before the Doctor could worry about his intentions, he spoke.

“Rose, Doctor, Donna—come with me. The circle must be broken.”

The Doctor jumped to his feet and helped Rose and Donna up. “Ood Sigma. Rose said she thought you might have a bit of a mind of your own.”

“All Ood have a mind of our own, Doctor.”

The Doctor felt his ears get hot at the mild reproof. “Right, of course. Ah… I’ll let you lead the way, shall I?” he said, pointing in a random direction.

Ood Sigma set off at a fast pace, leading them around the fighting to another warehouse. The Doctor pointed the sonic at the lock box, destroying the controls instead of just unlocking the door.

Like the warehouse that housed Ood Conversion, they were immediately met with a set of stairs. The song grew louder as they ran down them, and when they reached the main level of the building, the Doctor darted over to a railing and looked down on an enormous brain.

“The Ood Brain,” he said in a hushed voice. “Now it all makes sense. That’s the missing link. The third element, binding them together. Forebrain, hindbrain, and this, the telepathic centre.”

A sudden surge of anger from Rose took him by surprise, and he looked over at her. “They’re supposed to be connected,” she said, grinding out the words. “The song, it’s like our bond, Doctor.”

Before the Doctor could respond to the memories she’d dragged out, he heard the sound of chains clinking on his right. He turned cautiously and wasn’t surprised to find Mr. Halpen, pointing a pistol at them.

“Cargo. I can always go into cargo,” he said as he walked slowly towards them, Dr. Ryder behind him. “I’ve got the rockets; I’ve got the sheds. Smaller business. Much more manageable, without livestock.”

“He’s mined the area,” Ryder said, the anger in his eyes making it clear what he thought of that fact.

“You’re going to kill it?” gasped Donna.

Halpen reached the railing and looked down on the brain. “They found that… thing, centuries ago beneath the northern glacier.”

“Those pylons,” the Doctor said, noticing them for the first time. He’d been too excited to find the brain before to realise what he was looking at.

“In a circle,” Donna agreed. “The circle must be broken.”

“A telepathic dampening field,” Rose spat out. “Keeping them from connecting for two hundred years.”

The Doctor shuddered; he knew that pain very well. Five months had nearly been enough to drive him mad. He couldn’t imagine going on without their bond for two hundred years.

Halpen frowned at the Ood who’d brought them there. “And you, Ood Sigma, you brought them
here. I expected better.”

“My place is at your side, sir,” Ood Sigma said smoothly as he walked around the Doctor, Rose, and Donna to stand with Mr. Halpen.

The man chuckled. “Still subservient. Good Ood.”

“If that barrier thing’s in place,” Donna said, waving at the railing and the Ood Brain beneath it, “how come the Ood started breaking out?”

The Doctor nodded; he’d been wondering that himself. “Maybe it’s taken centuries to adapt. The subconscious reaching out?”

Dr. Ryder stepped forward. “But the process was too slow. It had to be accelerated.” He shot a scathing glance at Halpen. “You should never give me access to the controls, Mr. Halpen. I lowered the barrier to its minimum. Friends of the Ood, sir. It’s taken me ten years to infiltrate the company, and I succeeded.”

Halpen narrowed his eyes, then smiled “Yes. Yes, you did.”

The Doctor recognised the intent in Halpen’s voice a second too late to stop him from pushing Dr. Ryder over the catwalk and onto the Ood Brain. He tried, darting forward to lean over the railing, but he wasn’t in time. Instead, he watched, horrified, as Ryder sank into the neural tissue, slowly absorbed by the species he’d come to save.

Donna and Rose were hanging over the railing with him, and it was Donna who found her voice first. “You—you murdered him.”

The Doctor straightened up and glared at Mr. Halpen, who was busy rolling his eyes at Donna, as if she were a naive child. “Very observant, Ginger.”

He pointed his pistol at the three of them, and the Doctor shifted to put himself in front of Donna and Rose.

“Now, then.” He coughed as he looked down at the gun in his hand. “Can’t say I’ve ever shot anyone before.”

He gagged, and the Doctor tensed, ready to take advantage of the smallest weakness on Halpen’s part that might let him overpower him.

“Can’t say I’m going to like it,” Halpen continued. Then he shrugged and smirked. “But er, it’s not exactly a normal day, is it? Still.” He raised the gun to fire.

“Would you like a drink, sir?” Ood Sigma asked, holding out a shot glass.

Halpen chuckled. “I think hair loss is the least of my problems right now, thanks.”

The Doctor watched Ood Sigma smoothly position himself between Halpen and his gun, and the Doctor, Rose, and Donna.

*I told you he was different from the other Ood,* Rose said.

“Please have a drink, sir,” Ood Sigma said—no, that was an order. Calmly given, but clearly an order.

“If—” Halpen gagged again. “If you’re going to stand in their way, I’ll shoot you too.”
By the end of his sentence, it was obvious his body was trying to push something up through his throat. Somehow, the Doctor didn’t think it was a typical regurgitation.

“Please have a drink, sir,” Ood Sigma insisted.

Halpen’s eyes widened in fear, and the gun shook in his hands. “Have, have you poisoned me?”

“Natural Ood must never kill, sir.”

“What’s in that drink?” Rose asked.

Ood Sigma half-turned, so he could look at them and keep a watchful eye on Halpen at the same time. “Ood graft suspended in a biological compound, Rose Tyler.”

Halpen pressed his hand to his head. “What the hell does that mean?”

“Oh, dear.” The Doctor took in Halpen’s appearance, from the balding head to the way he was sweating, looking like something was trying to force its way out of his oesophagus.

“Tell me!” Halpen demanded.

The Doctor was happy to oblige. He couldn’t have thought of a more fitting punishment for the man who’d spent his entire life subjugating the Ood.

“Funny thing, the subconscious. Takes all sorts of shapes,” he explained. “Came out in the red eye as revenge, came out in the rabid Ood as anger, and then there was patience.” The Doctor looked down at the Ood Brain, listening to the inherent compassion in the Ood song and imagining how that would have swayed the patient creature. “All that intelligence and mercy, focused on Ood Sigma.”

He leaned forward and looked closely at the trembling businessman. “How’s the hair loss, Mr. Halpen?” he taunted.

Halpen reached up and pulled a whole hank of hair out of the back of his head. He looked at it in shock, then looked at Ood Sigma, somehow daring to look betrayed, even after all he had done to the Ood.

“What have you done?” he sobbed, still trying to hold the gun in his shaking hands.

The Doctor straightened and shook his head. “Oh, they’ve been preparing you for a very long time. And now you’re standing next to the Ood Brain. Mr. Halpen, can you hear it? Listen.”

Sweat beaded up on Mr. Halpen’s forehead as he listened to the Ood song, truly hearing it for the first time, but certainly not for the last.

“What have you…” He gagged before he could repeat his earlier question. “I’m not…”

He tried swallowing, but a moment later, he dropped the gun and slowly raised his hands to the top of his scalp. The Doctor felt a shiver of disgust mixed in with his curiosity when the man bent forward and peeled his skin off. The tentacles that had been pushing their way up his throat finally dropped out of his mouth, and when he stood up again…

“They, they turned him into an Ood?” Donna said breathlessly.

The Doctor put his hands in his pockets and nodded. “Yep.”

“Oh, that’s brilliant,” Rose breathed. “I mean… don’t get me wrong, it’s disturbing, but what an
ingenious revenge and punishment.”

The Ood formerly known as Mr. Halpen groaned in dismay, and the Doctor wondered how long he would retain his memories of his former life.

A moment later, he coughed up a hindbrain, catching it in his hand. The Doctor couldn’t help wondering, as he looked at it, how exactly natural born Ood got their hindbrains. Did it happen like this? Were Ood born, or hatched?

Ood Sigma put his hand on the shoulder of his new brethren, interrupting the Doctor’s musings. “He has become Oodkind, and we will take care of him,” he said serenely.

Donna pressed her hands to her temples. “It’s weird, being with you,” she said, sounding a bit dazed. “I can’t tell what’s right and what’s wrong any more.”

Rose put her arm around Donna’s shoulders. “Yeah, it’s better that way though. People who know for certain tend to be like Mr. Halpen.”

The Doctor jolted forward when something started beeping. He’d forgotten that Halpen had rigged the entire enclosure to explode. “Oh!” He reached over the railing and turned the detonator off. “That’s better.”

That left only one thing left to be done. He jogged over to the control panel for the telepathic dampening field, then spun around and looked from Rose to Ood Sigma. “Now, no one here has been more upset on your behalf than Rose. Would you let her be the one to set you free?”

Ood Sigma bowed slightly to Rose. “A song has been sung for generations of a Wolf who would break the circle. The honour is yours, Rose Tyler.”

The Doctor purposely ignored the second reference to Bad Wolf in a week, and gestured for Rose to come forward.

“I have no idea what I’m doing,” she warned him as she walked across the catwalk to join him.

He pointed at the dials on the control panel. “Turn those all the way down first.” The electric crackling intensified as she did. “And now, flip the switch, Rose.”

She threw a final lever with gusto, and after a few more seconds of crackling, the electrical current flowing through the pylons shut off. Ood song filled the room, no longer the song of captivity, but the song of unity.

“I can hear it!” Donna gasped, her face lighting up at the joy in the song that hadn’t been there before.

The Doctor looked at Rose and reached for their bond, warm contentment burning in his hearts when she reciprocated the touch, twining their minds together in a gesture that, had he been forced to describe it, he would have said felt like holding hands.

“We should rejoin the others outside,” Ood Sigma said.

The Doctor blinked. “Yes, right. After you, Ood Sigma. And…” He gestured at the Ood formerly known as Halpen. “Whatever you end up being called.”

After ten minutes in the dark cellar, the sunlight was blinding. But the sight they saw when they blinked the light out of their eyes was even more dazzling. The Ood were standing together in
groups, hands raised in supplication as they joined in the song.

And the humans? The humans had laid down their weapons and were watching, awestruck, as they finally learned the true majesty of this species they had belittled for far too long.

“Time for us to be going,” the Doctor said quietly, taking Rose’s hand.

“We will see you off,” Ood Sigma said, gesturing to the ten Ood in the circle closest to them.

The Doctor made one last stop as they left the compound, poking into the operations centre to catch the chatter on the radio. He grinned when he heard the message he’d hoped for.

The Ood song followed them on their trek back to the TARDIS. It filled the entire planet now, echoing and resonating in the atmosphere, the way it had always been meant to do—the way it had done for generations before humans arrived on the planet.

“The message has gone out,” the Doctor said when they reached the TARDIS. The Ood deserved to know what he’d learned from eavesdropping on the radio. “That song resonated across the galaxies. Everyone heard it. Everyone knows. The rockets are bringing them back. The Ood are coming home.”

“We thank you, Rose, Doctor, Donna, friends of Oodkind,” Ood Sigma said. He cocked his head in that almost avian fashion the Ood had, and a shiver ran down the Doctor’s spine. “You would be welcome to stay with us if you wished, but I think that your song is not yet over.”

Rose smiled at the Ood and squeezed the Doctor’s hand. “Our song never ends,” she said, for once feeling confident enough to say that definitively.

Ood Sigma bowed and took a step back, into the semicircle of Ood gathered around the TARDIS. “Then we will say goodbye for now, but not, I think, forever.”

“Yeah…” the Doctor drawled. “We’ll be off, then, I think.”

Ood Sigma raised his hands, and the Ood behind him mirrored the gesture. The Ood song crescendoed around them, and Rose blinked back tears at its beauty.

“Take this song with you.”

“We will,” Rose and Donna promised together.

The Doctor nodded. “Always.”

“And know this, Rose, Doctor, Donna. You will never be forgotten. Our children will sing of the ones who freed us from captivity, and our children’s children, and the wind and the ice and the snow will carry your names forever.”

The weight of what they’d done hit Rose, and she couldn’t speak. She settled for a smile and a nod, and then followed the Doctor and Donna back into the TARDIS.

“Ready?” the Doctor asked quietly as she closed the door.

Rose nodded, then glanced at Donna as the Doctor sent them into the Vortex. “Do you still want to go home?”

Donna shook her head firmly, and Rose was relieved to see a smile on her face. “No. Definitely not.”
“Good,” she said fervently. “I won’t tell you there isn’t ugliness out there, Donna, but that’s not all the universe is. There’s so much beauty, so many amazing things to see and amazing people to meet.”

Donna nodded. “I know. I think I get it now. You can’t be afraid to see a little ugliness, not if you want to see some of the tremendous beauty.”

“And there is beauty, Donna. So much.” Rose tilted her head and bit her lip, then said, “I could show you some of my photo albums, if you like. We could sit in the library tonight and share some stories?”

A slow smile lit up Donna’s face. “Yeah, I think I’d like that.”

Rose had already taken a step up the ramp towards the corridor when Donna’s voice stopped her. “There’s just one more question I have. Ood Sigma, he said you have a song of your own. What did he mean?”

Rose and the Doctor exchanged a look. On one hand, this was only Donna’s second trip with them. It had been two months before they’d explained their bond to Martha. On the other hand, Martha had needed that information on their very next adventure, and Donna had just seen up close and personal how much a part of their lives telepathy was.

Finally, the Doctor tugged at his ear and cleared his throat. “Right, so… we’re not human.”

Donna rolled her eyes. “Got that, thanks,” she snarked. “Bigger on the inside spaceship is kind of a dead giveaway.”

“And! Just like different human cultures have different marriage customs, Time Lords took a life partner in a way that would be completely foreign to humans.”

“But you’ve got wedding rings,” Donna said. “And you said you were engaged last Christmas.” A new memory came back, and she frowned at Rose. “You said your mum was from Peckham,” she argued, remembering the sadness on Rose’s face as she’d pointed out her home while they were on top of the office building in the City.

Rose winced. “Well, I used to be human… only I’m not so much anymore.” She shrugged. “It’s hard to explain.”

“The important thing,” the Doctor interjected, “is that she’s telepathic enough to share a marriage bond.”

Donna tilted her head and looked at the Doctor and Rose. “You mean like… you can read each other’s thoughts?”

“That’s part of it,” Rose said carefully. “But it’s also feeling each other’s emotions, being able to find each other, things like that.”

“Oh!”

Rose jumped a little at Donna’s exclamation.

“That’s why you were so upset, back there with the big Ood brain. Because you were imagining what it would be like if someone made it so you couldn’t communicate, like the humans had done to the Ood.”
“Pretty much,” the Doctor agreed.

His voice was tight, and Rose smiled at him and placed a soothing touch on the bond. *We’re together now,* she reminded him.

Then she turned to Donna. “Come on, let’s get into comfortable clothes and relax in the library. I bet we’ll find food waiting for us when we get there.”

“Yeah, all right,” Donna agreed. “I’m definitely ready to hear more of your stories.”
Donna laughed and held onto the TARDIS console as they flew through time and space. “Do you even have your license to fly this thing?” she asked the Doctor.

Rose stretched across two panels and nudged a control, and their flight smoothed out considerably. “Would you believe he failed the driving test?”

“No!”

The Doctor stuck his tongue out at her sarcasm.

“Oh, very mature, Spaceman,” Donna gibed. “How old are you, twelve?”

“Add two zeroes on the end, and you’ll come close,” he retorted.

Donna’s eyes widened, but she didn’t know why that should be a surprise. He was an alien, after all—who knew how his species aged? She looked speculatively at Rose, wondering if her “not exactly” human status meant she would live as long as the Doctor did.

They reached their destination before she could really follow that line of thought, and Donna straightened her sleeveless top and slung her bag over her shoulder.

“One more thing before we go out there,” Rose said.

Donna stopped with one foot on the ramp and turned around. “What’s that?”

“Do you have your mobile on you?”

Donna frowned in confusion, but dug in her bag and placed it in Rose’s outstretched hand. “I just thought I’d take a few pictures.”

“Hmmm… We can do better than your mobile for that,” Rose muttered absently as she pointed her sonic screwdriver at the phone. “Doctor?”

“Ah, yes.”

Donna looked back and forth at her friends, one of them messing with her phone, the other rummaging in a drawer. “What are the two of you up to?” she asked finally.

Rose smiled brightly as she slid her sonic screwdriver back into her bag. “It was time we gave you an upgrade,” she explained. “Universal roaming—gives you a signal from almost anywhere. And!” She flipped the phone open and tapped at it for a few moments, then handed it back to Donna. “I just added my number to your contacts.”

“You have a mobile.” Donna didn’t know why she was surprised, but somehow, she was.

Rose reached into her bag again and pulled out a sleek phone with a glass face. “Yep! A few years ahead of yours, but I wanted one with a good camera. Speaking of, Doctor?”

The Doctor grinned and handed Donna a small digital camera. “This will take much better pictures than your phone,” he explained. “And now, if we’re ready…”
Donna shook her head and dropped the camera and her phone into her bag. Of course they had better technology than she was used to—they probably had all sorts of futuristic gizmos. She wasn’t going to let her confusion get in the way of her shopping day.

“Oh, I am definitely ready for this,” she exclaimed as she jogged down the ramp and pulled open the TARDIS doors. Warm sunlight hit her face, and she sighed in delight.

“Welcome to Anguin,” the Doctor said after locking the TARDIS tight. “It’s just what you asked for last night—someplace warm, with lots of shopping.”

Donna grinned at the Doctor and Rose. After they’d taken a wander down memory lane, showing her their photo albums, they’d asked where she’d wanted to go next. With the cold of the Ood Sphere still settled in her bones, “someplace warm” had slipped from her lips before she even thought about it.

Donna reached into her bag and pulled out the oversized pair of sunglasses she’d tucked away that morning. “Right, you two. What do I need to know about intergalactic shopping?” She looked around at the alien city, with the business signs all translated into English.

“Well, you’ll need money for one thing,” the Doctor said. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a silver stick about four inches long. “Credit stick, with 10,000 galactic standard credits.”

To the Doctor’s surprise, instead of taking the money right away, Donna crossed her arms and pursed her lips. “Donna?” he said uncertainly. “You want to go shopping, don’t you?”

“I haven’t had a job in weeks.”

The Doctor blinked at the seeming non-sequitur, but Rose plucked the credit stick from his fingers and pressed it into Donna’s hand. “Yes, you have,” she said firmly. “You save the universe with us. We don’t have a benefits package and sometimes, the hours are lousy. But we do try to offer some compensation, outside of the exotic travel destinations.”

Donna bit the side of her cheek and tapped the credit stick against her palm, then suddenly she smiled at Rose. “All right then.” She dropped it into her bag, then pushed her sunglasses back up on her nose. “Come on then, don’t just stand there! The shops are waiting!”

Rose laughed and linked her arm with Donna’s, and the Doctor shoved his hands in his pockets and walked a few steps behind them. Thank you, for understanding Donna’s worry and reassuring her, he told Rose. I’m rubbish at that.

As they made their way from the outskirts of town into the main shopping district, he realised the city was quite a bit busier than usual. He had to speed up to not lose sight of Donna and Rose on the crowded walkway. Then Rose slowed down and beckoned for him to join them, so he jogged forward and took her hand.

“Is it just me, or does Anguin look a bit more festive than it did the last time we were here?” She pointed to the garlands of apples and dried wheat stalks adorning the lampposts and brick buildings.

The Doctor frowned and turned in a slow circle, tuning into his time senses as he did. When he pinpointed the date, he grinned and bounced lightly on his toes. “Oh, it’s Lammas!” he chirped, happy with the serendipitous landing.

“Lammas?” Donna said. “Like the old holiday in August?”
He nodded. “You’ll find echoes of Earth holidays throughout the galaxy,” he explained. “Either things colonists brought with them, or things expatriates brought home with them after a stint of life on Earth.”

Donna arched an eyebrow, but didn’t argue. “All right then, what’s this Lammas like?” she asked.

The Doctor started walking again, following the crowds of people walking through the streets towards the palace at the heart of the city. “It’s a festival. Food and games on the palace lawn all afternoon, then a ball inside the palace in the evening that’s open to every citizen of the province.”

“A ball?” Donna’s eyes sparkled with excitement. “An alien ball in a royal palace?”

“I think that’s what I said, yeah,” the Doctor teased. “That all right with you, Donna Noble?”

Donna raised an eyebrow. “You won’t be laughing when you realise what that means. I’ve got a credit stick in my pocket and a party tonight. We’re going dress shopping.”

“OoOoOoOoOo”

“You didn’t buy a dress this afternoon,” the Doctor commented to Rose as he pulled on his crisp, white tuxedo shirt. “Are you going to browse the wardrobe room instead?”

Rose cracked open the door to the ensuite and peeked out at him, one loose curl brushing against the curve of her cheek. “Nope!” she said cheerfully. “I have a dress that I’ve been saving for the right occasion.”

The Doctor craned his neck, trying to see into the other room for a glimpse of this dress, but Rose laughed and closed the door firmly between them. He sighed and ignored the anticipation coiling in his stomach, focusing on getting himself ready to go instead.

He was leaning down, peering in Rose’s vanity mirror and getting his hair to stand up just right when the ensuite door opened again. Before he could turn around, Rose issued a silent request for him to stay where he was. He could hear the whisper of silk as she walked across the room, and he tapped his fingers against her vanity while he waited for her to be reflected in the mirror.

A moment later, she appeared behind him, a vision in shimmering silk. The Doctor sucked in a breath and spun around, his mouth gaping open.

“Do you like it?” Rose ran her hand down the front of her dress, drawing his attention to the way the colour shifted through shades of blue from deep cobalt to pale sky blue before fading into a pearlescent white skirt. She took a step towards him, and the soft skirt swished around her calves as she walked.

“You’re gorgeous, love.” When he held his hand out for her, Rose took it and twirled slowly under his arm before sliding into his embrace. He caught some of the dress between his thumb and forefinger, enjoying the cool, slippery texture. “Ekbrilon silk?” he asked, noticing how the light caught and reflected off the fabric.

Rose nodded, and the curls piled loosely on top of her head shifted with the movement. “Like I said, I’ve been saving it for the right occasion.”

The Doctor ran his fingertips along the line of her right shoulder, left bare by the strapless dress. Then he traced a line over her clavicle to rest over her breastbone, smiling when the touch pulled a shiver from Rose.
He reached back to the vanity and picked up the new necklace the TARDIS had left out. “Well, now I know why she suggested you wear this today,” he said, holding up the string of blue topaz, sapphires, and diamonds. Rose reached out and touched the delicate necklace, then turned around so he could put it on for her.

When she turned back around, he held up his arms, demonstrating his still undone cuffs. “Help me out now?”

Rose tilted her head and frowned slightly at the Doctor. He was more than capable of putting on his own cufflinks, so why… “Oh!”

He nodded and handed her the box containing his anniversary gift. “I haven’t had a chance to wear them yet. That might be part of the reason we’re going to a ball tonight, actually.”

Warmth spread through Rose as she took the first cufflink and fastened it on his left wrist. “I’d never designed jewellery before,” she said as she snapped it into place, then moved onto his right wrist. The white point star at the centre of the rose was dazzling.

“I love them,” the Doctor told her. He twisted his left arm so he could see the cufflink and ran his finger over the Gallifreyan characters engraved around the base of the piece.

Rose sighed when he reached for her, cupping her face in his hands. His thumbs stroked her cheekbones, and she shifted closer to him, resting her hands over his hearts. “You are my forever, Rose,” he whispered, then he lowered his lips to meet hers.

The kiss was soft and tender, inviting Rose to melt into his embrace. But when she slid her hand up over his chest and didn’t find the lapel of his jacket to grab onto, she remembered he still wasn’t ready to go. Reluctantly, she stepped back, putting her fingers over his lips when he tried to kiss her again.

“Let’s get your bowtie done and your jacket on, and then I bet Donna is already waiting for us in the console room.”

The royal ballroom was everything Donna had dreamed of. A gleaming wood floor for dancing, sparkling chandeliers hanging from above, floor to ceiling windows with the curtains currently pulled back to let in the remaining daylight… She craned her neck and spotted groups of tables off to the side of the room, where tired dancers could sit and enjoy punch or refreshments.

“Oh, it’s brilliant!” she breathed.

The Doctor chuckled. “Anguin is definitely a beautiful planet,” he agreed.

Donna watched the couples dancing and ran her hand over her blue and green dress. She’d purchased it with the thought that its swishy skirt would be perfect for dancing, but going to a formal ball with her married and very much in love friends, she expected to be the third wheel.

The Doctor looked from her to the dance floor to Rose, and Donna sighed. However, just as she opened her mouth to tell them they should go dance and not worry about her, a tall, handsome man with dark curls approached them.

He bowed, just slightly, then smiled at Donna. “I hope you forgive my boldness, but when I saw you enter, I knew I needed to introduce myself. I am Regan.”
“Donna. Donna Noble.”

His smile revealed white, perfectly straight teeth. “Donna Noble, would you honour me with a dance?”

“I’d love to!” she answered, taking Regan’s hand and letting him lead her onto the floor. Once they were in position, she glanced around and spotted Rose and the Doctor just a few yards away. Then the music started, and she focused her attention on her partner.

The steps were new to her, but Regan deftly led her through the moves, and after one turn around the dance floor, Donna was keeping up with most of the other couples.

“You have learned very quickly, Donna,” Regan praised. “Most off-worlders take more time to grasp the basic footwork of this dance.”

Donna cocked her head and looked at him. “Hang on. How did you know I’m an off-worlder?”

Regan chuckled and gestured to Donna’s hair. “You and the friend you came with both have pale hair. Every native Anguinne has dark hair.”

Donna glanced around the ballroom. There were a few people with blonde or red hair, but most of them were shades of brown. “Well, that explains why the dress shops were so excited when I was looking for a dress this afternoon,” she muttered, more to herself than anything.

Rose caught her eye and winked as they passed each other on the dance floor, and Donna laughed merrily. When the dance was done, another man took Regan’s place, and she finally accepted that her prediction for the evening had apparently been completely wrong.

The second dance ended, and to her surprise, Rose walked over to her and held her hand out. “Would you like to dance?”

Donna had noticed that the locals didn’t seem to care about the sex of their dance partners. Still, she hesitated. “Where’s the Doctor?” she asked, not wanting to get in the way of their evening. “I’ve got plenty of people to dance with.”

Rose waved in the direction of the refreshments table. “He’s in line getting something for all three of us to drink after we’re done dancing.” She raised an eyebrow. “Assuming you want to dance, that is.”

Donna leaned back so she could peer around the crowd and spotted the Doctor at the end of a long line. “Absolutely,” she told Rose, a wide smile crossing her face.

They took to the dance floor together and watched the other couples for a moment before copying the steps. This dance was different from the others, more like country dancing. Once they’d joined in, they both laughed. Donna spun around Rose, copying half the dancers, then Rose took her hand again and they twirled around the floor.

It was Rose’s turn to spin while Donna stood in place, and she stared, mesmerised by the unique fabric. “That dress is gorgeous,” she told Rose once they were hand-in-hand again. “I love the way it shimmers, like it’s been sprinkled with glitter.”

Rose held her skirt out with her free hand. “There’s this planet called Ekbrilon,” she explained, “and there’s… something in the soil, something luminescent that makes the cotton and the silk sparkle.” She dropped the skirt, then nodded at Donna’s dress. “You look lovely, too, Donna. I didn’t say earlier.”
“Why, thank you,” Donna said, spinning so her skirt would billow out around her, then adding a curtsy to her dance steps.

They talked and laughed for a few more turns around the floor, then Rose’s expression sobered. “And how are you liking life on the TARDIS so far?”

Donna tilted her head and pretended to consider, then shook her head when a frown creased Rose’s forehead. “Are you kidding?” she asked. “Hot water that never runs out, the most comfortable bed I’ve ever slept in, and a media room that has every single episode of AbFab—including the ones that haven’t been filmed yet back home. What’s not to love about this life?”

Rose raised an eyebrow. “Getting kidnapped by priestesses and tied to an altar for sacrifice? Handcuffed to a pipe and nearly electrocuted by the power of an alien mind and his translator ball? I don’t know… things like that, maybe.”

Donna rolled her eyes. “Yeah, but we talked about that. You have to take the bad with the good, right?” She gestured around the ballroom. “And believe me, from where I’m standing right now, the good definitely outweighs the bad.”

“Excellent!” A relieved smile crossed Rose’s face, but a moment later, it faded when she caught sight of something over Donna’s shoulder. “Of course, that could all change in an instant,” she muttered. “The Doctor is over there, talking to the crown princess. This is the part where he’ll either impress her with his knowledge and she’ll invite him to become her chief advisor or something, or he’ll unwittingly stumble into some kind of social faux pas and insult her.” She smiled wryly at Donna. “What I’m saying is, be ready to run.”

The Doctor sighed impatiently when the person in front of him at the refreshments table ordered so many drinks they had to give her a tray. But finally, it was his turn, and he got three glasses of the sparkling punch Rose had requested.

Holding them carefully, he walked along the edge of the ballroom to the small alcove where tables were set up. He found three empty chairs and set the glasses down before taking a seat.

From where he sat, he could watch Rose and Donna as they swished together around the ballroom. A ginger and a blonde dancing together were easily the most striking pair on the dance floor. Judging by the looks they garnered from the Anguinne as they moved together, he wasn’t the only one who thought so.

“Is this seat taken?” a stranger asked, pulling him away from his pleasant observations.

The Doctor blinked and looked at the young woman. His eyes widened when he recognised the tiara that declared her status as the crown princess. “No, Your Highness. I’m saving these two,” he added, gesturing to the chairs on either side of him, “but that one is free.”

She nodded, then pulled the chair out and sat down across from him. “You are not from our world,” she observed. The Doctor frowned, and she pointed to the floor. “I saw you arrive with the other off-worlders.”

“Ah. No, we’re travellers.” The Doctor waved at Rose as she and Donna swept past them. “Rose and I wanted to take Donna to a real alien ball in a royal palace, so… here we are.”

The princess watched the women for a moment, then sighed wistfully. “Your wives are… very beautiful.”
“Oh, I’m only married to the blonde,” the Doctor corrected automatically. “Donna is our friend.”

The princess blushed. “I apologise for my mistake.”

The Doctor shook his head and nodded at Rose and Donna. “I suppose, with them both wearing blue they look like a couple who’d planned complementary outfits.”

“And they are obviously at ease with each other.” The princess looked at the women, then at the Doctor. “And… Does Donna have someone at home waiting for her?”

The Doctor opened his mouth to say no, but just in time he caught the speculative gleam in the princess’ eyes and remembered one small bit of Anguinne culture he’d almost forgotten.

He nodded fervently. “Excellent bloke named Lee,” he rambled, grabbing the first name that popped into his head. “Absolutely head over heels for her. He’s planning to ask her to marry him the next time we’re home—can’t get him to talk about anything else.”

Meet me at the door, he told Rose.

With one last smile for the princess, the Doctor stood up. “If you’ll excuse me, Your Highness, I forgot that Rose asked for something to eat along with her drink.”

The princess blinked and opened her mouth, presumably to protest his hasty departure, but the Doctor didn’t stay to hear what she had to say. He skirted around the edge of the dance floor before she could realise he wasn’t going to the refreshments table after all, and was relieved to find Donna and Rose at the door, like he’d requested.

“Come on,” he said in a low voice, taking Rose’s hand in his right and Donna’s in his left. “Back to the TARDIS.”

They nodded at the guards as they passed through the outer gate, and he breathed a little easier once they were in the street. Still, he kept them going at a fast pace through the empty streets, not wanting to be detained.

“Oi! Slow down!” Donna protested, pulling her hand from his. “Some of us are wearing heels, you know.”

The Doctor shook his head impatiently and looked back up the street. “I’m sorry, Donna, but you really want to get to the TARDIS.”

“And why’s that?” she challenged, her hands on her hips. “Rose said you might accidentally insult the princess. What did you say to ruin our evening?”

The Doctor scowled at her. “If it’s anyone’s fault, it’s yours,” he snapped. “There’s a tradition on Anguin that the crown princess can marry any unattached person she chooses, and she took a fancy to you.”

“How’d she know I’m unattached?” Donna threw her hands up in the air. “How do all the aliens always know I’m single? Is there some kind of invisible sign that reads, “Human female, single?”

“Well actually if you must know, she assumed the three of us were married,” the Doctor retorted, exasperated by her questioning. “I forgot about that tradition, or I wouldn’t have corrected her.”

Rose laughed, while Donna gaped at him. The Doctor rolled his eyes and raked his hands through his hair. “I doubt she’ll go to the effort of sending guards after us, given that she hadn’t even been
introduced to you yet. But I’d really rather not be proven wrong. So, could we maybe pick up the pace and get back to the TARDIS, before Rose and I are left to execute a rescue operation?”

The sarcastic tone of his voice pulled Donna out of her daze. “Yeah. Yeah, of course.”

“Good!”

The TARDIS was only another five minutes away, and Donna tapped her toes anxiously while he unlocked the doors. As soon as the door was open, she pushed past the Doctor into the TARDIS. He looked at Rose and rolled his eyes as they followed after her.

“Eager enough to be back now, are we?”

Donna rested her hands on the console and leaned forward. “Well, I’m flattered by all the interest, but I’m not keen on staying on an alien planet the rest of my life. So if you could maybe get us out of here?”

The Doctor snapped a mocking salute, then he spun around the console and put the TARDIS in the Vortex. He watched Rose as he moved, feeling her amusement close to bubbling over and wondering what she was thinking.

She didn’t make him wonder long. As soon as they stopped, she leaned back on the console and grinned at Donna. “So. First time being propositioned by a member of an alien species. How do you feel about that milestone, Donna?”

Donna had been brushing invisible bits of lint off her chiffon skirt, but at that question, her hands stilled. She looked at Rose through narrowed eyes. “You mean things like this happen… a lot?”

Rose shrugged. “I wouldn’t say a lot, but yeah. We’ve all been chatted up now and then.”

Donna snorted and shook her head. “Well I didn’t travel with you as some kind of… alternative dating site.” She tipped her head and tapped her finger on her chin. “Although… my mum would go mad if I married some bloke from outer space.”

“Welllll…” the Doctor drawled. “If it helps, I told the princess you were almost engaged to someone named Lee. Something to keep your eye out for, maybe?”

Rose chuckled, then spun around and sashayed towards the corridor leading to their bedroom. “I’m gonna change into something comfy, then maybe we can meet in the media room for another first, Donna—your first glimpse of intergalactic cable.”
The trip to Anguin was the start of a series of firsts for Donna. First alien beach, followed by her first trip to the infirmary to treat her sunburn. First palace uprising, first time thrown in jail, first time visiting a place no humans had ever been before…

Rose studied her one morning as they gathered in the console room. There was a smile on her face, but more importantly, there was a glimmer of confidence in her eyes that hadn’t been there a month ago.

*Time to put her in the driver’s seat.* “Donna Noble,” she said, gesturing expansively. “What would you like to do today?”

Donna snorted and pointed from Rose to the Doctor. “Do you know how much you sound like him sometimes?”

“Oh!” The Doctor sniffed and adjusted the knot on his burgundy tie. “I don’t know why you say that like it’s a bad thing.”

“Maybe not all the time, Spaceman, but we really only need one over-the-top alien on this ship.”

Rose laughed when the Doctor frowned and rubbed at his eyebrow. He couldn’t decide if he should be offended on his behalf or hers, and his consternation was endearing.

“Well, Donna,” she said, “I’m afraid you’re going to have to put up with two over-the-top aliens. But that doesn’t answer my question. What do you want to do today?”

Donna leaned back against the railing and looked at the ceiling for a few minutes before straightening up, a broad grin on her face. “I want to learn how to fly the TARDIS.”

Rose blinked. That was certainly another first, but she hadn’t expected the request. Martha had been with them for nearly a year when they’d started to give lessons, and Donna had only been with them for a little over a month.

The Doctor spoke up before she got over her surprise. “All right then,” he said readily. “We can give you a few beginner lessons at least.”

“I think I’ll just sit here and watch,” Rose said, taking a seat on the jump seat.

Donna frowned. “But you’re a better pilot than him.”

Rose nodded. “And he’s got hundreds of years experience in teaching people how to fly her. Knowing how to do something is way different from knowing how to teach someone else to do it.”

Donna looked a little less certain, and Rose smiled reassuringly. “If it makes you feel better, Donna, he taught me. At least… until the TARDIS took over.”

“Not sure that helps, but thanks.” Donna took a deep breath, then looked at the Doctor. “I’m ready.”

The Doctor took a circuit of the console, adjusting a few dials as he went. “All right. The very first thing I’m going to teach you is how to move through the Time Vortex. That’s where we are right now.”

“What is the Vortex?” Donna asked.
“Too complicated to explain to someone who doesn’t have an advanced understanding of temporal mechanics,” the Doctor said.

Rose cleared her throat and shook her head when the Doctor looked up at her. He shrugged and gestured, as if to say, *If you’d like to explain…*

She nodded sharply, then smiled at Donna. “The Time Vortex is the fifth dimension, Donna. It’s a physical space that encompasses time. Picture it… like King’s Cross Station.”

The Doctor snorted softly. “Been reading *Harry Potter* again, Rose?”

“Oh! It works.” She looked at Donna again. “So, there are twelve platforms at King’s Cross, right? Plus, from there you can get to almost every line on the Tube.”

Donna nodded slowly. “So the Vortex is like a hub.”

The Doctor rocked back on his heels and tugged on his ear. “I take it back, Rose—that’s a rather brilliant analogy.”

Rose preened. “Why thank you.”

He smiled at her, then looked back at Donna. “So, following that explanation, what we do when we’re ready to leave the Vortex is navigate through it until we find the right platform. That’s the part I want to teach you today.”

Donna laced her fingers together and stretched them out. “All right then, what do we do first?”

The Doctor beckoned to her. “Come stand over here,” he said. “Put your left hand on this lever, and your right on that pump.” He pointed to the controls he wanted her to work, then raised an eyebrow at Rose. “Sure you don’t want to help?”

Rose sighed theatrically, but jumped off the seat. “You don’t really need my help,” she said, “but since you asked, I’ll take the hand brake off for you so she’s floating free in the Vortex.”

The hand brake was a small lever on the opposite side of the console from the dematerialisation lever. Rose had often wondered why exactly the ship had configured the controls in such an inconvenient fashion, but the only answer she’d gotten was that TARDISes weren’t meant to be piloted alone.

The time rotor started its slow up-and-down chug as soon as the hand brake was released. The Doctor nodded and took a breath. “All right, Donna, the two controls you’ve got are for time. The lever sends us forward or backward. Which way do you want to go?”

Donna slowly moved the lever, and Rose felt them shift in the Vortex.

“That’s it,” the Doctor encouraged. “Now, the pump controls our velocity. Do you want to get where we’re going a bit faster? Pump it a bit harder.”

Donna kept up a slow pump on the throttle and watched the time rotor with glowing eyes. “I can’t believe I’m doing this!”

“No, neither can I,” the Doctor muttered.

Rose poked him in the ribs, but he didn’t have a chance to defend himself before he had to go running around the console as Donna jerked her lever.
“Oh, careful.” He grabbed the mallet he still kept on the console, despite all of Rose’s best efforts to convince him to put it away. He hit one control and pulled a lever, then stepped back to let Donna take control again.

“Left hand down,” he instructed, repeating the instruction more vehemently when she didn’t comply quickly enough. “Left hand down!”

Donna pushed the lever down hard, and the TARDIS made a shuddering noise as she shifted abruptly. They all wobbled on their feet for a moment in the brief temporal turbulence.

The Doctor grabbed Donna’s arm, keeping them both upright. “Getting a bit too close to the 1980s.”

A scowl pinched Donna’s face into sharp lines. “What am I going to do, put a dent in them?”

Rose watched the Doctor take a deep breath, and she knew he was about ready to launch into lecture mode at top speed. She pressed her lips together to hide her smile and leaned against the railing to watch him in his element.

“You could—because here’s where the King’s Cross analogy breaks down. The TARDIS isn’t a passenger looking for a train. She’s an incredibly powerful time machine, barreling into the station herself. Too fast or too hard, and you can cause serious damage.”

Before Donna could come back with a witty retort, the muffled sound of a mobile ringing echoed in the console room. Rose frowned and reached into her jeans pocket for her phone. She took a peek at the caller ID before answering, and a wide smile spread across her face. “Hi, Martha.”

“Rose?” Martha sounded exactly like she remembered. “Oh, I’ve missed you. I need you and the Doctor back on Earth.”

“Oh, brilliant,” Rose said. “Here, I’ll let you give the coordinates to the Doctor.” She handed the phone over, saying, “Martha needs us on Earth.”

He nodded and took the phone. “Martha? Where are you?” He listened, adjusting the spatial coordinates as she talked. “And when? February 5th, 2009 at 0900?”

“Excuse me, Donna,” Rose said, shifting in front of her to set the temporal coordinates. “It sounds like we’ve got someplace to be.”

“Excellent,” the Doctor said. “We’ll see you in just a minute, Martha Jones. Don’t you go anywhere.”

He tossed Rose’s phone back to her, then grinned at her and Donna and flipped the lever that would send them into flight. “Allons-y!”

The TARDIS rocked into flight, and they all clung to the console as they flew through the Vortex.

“Martha’s the one you travelled with before, yeah?” Donna asked.

Rose nodded. “She’s a medical student, or was when we met her. If it’s February now, it’s been nine months since we dropped her off at home. She might have finished her exams finally.”

The TARDIS landed with a slight hop and a bump, and Rose was out the door before they’d even settled. Martha stood at the end of the alley, a broad smile on her face that matched the one Rose could feel stretching her cheeks.

She took one step away from the TARDIS and Martha mirrored her, then they ran to hug each other.
“Oh, it’s good to see you,” Martha exclaimed. She pulled back and grabbed Rose’s hands. “Let’s not go nine months without even talking again, all right?”

Rose glanced over Martha’s shoulder, and her friend squeezed her hands. “Hang on. How long has it been for you?”

“A little over a year,” Rose admitted.

Martha blinked, then she nodded approvingly. “Good! I’m glad you took some time off.”

The TARDIS doors opened, and the Doctor’s coat brushed against Rose’s legs as he strode past her to sweep Martha up in a hug of his own. “Martha Jones,” he said exuberantly once he released her.

“Doctor.”

The Doctor stepped back and looked Martha over with a critical eye. “You haven’t changed a bit,” he pronounced after a moment. Shadows still lingered in her eyes, but they weren’t prominent like they had been before—only someone who knew to look for them would find them.

“Neither have you.” Martha glanced back at Rose. “You look good, both of you. Rose said it’s been a year?”

The Doctor nodded.

“A year for a year,” she mused, and he wasn’t surprised she put that together so quickly.

Martha’s gaze shifted to his right, and the Doctor turned slightly to include Donna in the conversation. Martha smiled and held her hand out. “You must be the new companion. I’m Martha—Martha Jones.”

Donna smiled warmly and shook her hand. “Donna Noble. Lovely to meet someone else mad enough to travel with these two.”

“Oi!” the Doctor and Rose protested in unison.

“Oh, I like you, Donna,” Martha said, a grin on her face.

“So, Martha,” the Doctor said, raising his voice a little to redirect the conversation. “We were wondering on our way here if you’d taken your exams yet.”

To his surprise, a secretive smile flitted across her face. “Not exactly,” she said mysteriously.

Before he could ask what that meant, the walkie-talkie on her hip buzzed. “Dr. Jones, report to base, please. Over.”

Martha took the walkie-talkie and brought it to her mouth. “This is Dr. Jones,” she said as she spun around and led the way out of the alley. “Operation Blue Sky is go, go, go. I repeat, this is a go.”

The Doctor and Rose looked at each other as they followed Martha, then shrugged when they realised the other was just as baffled by Martha’s sudden change in demeanour as they were.

A moment later, when they stood on the edge of the street and watched the convoy of UNIT vehicles make their way into the ATMOS factory, Martha’s behaviour made some sense. The Doctor’s eyebrows rose when a Jeep drove past them, carrying a colonel. This Operation Blue Sky, whatever that was, obviously was important to UNIT brass if a colonel was in charge.
But at the moment, he was more interested in the changes in Martha. He’d seen her stand with this military bearing before, and once he placed the memory, a knot of guilt in his gut. She’d looked like this when she’d faced down the Master. It was something she’d learned during the Year That Never Was.

Rose took his hand and brushed her thumb over his knuckles, and the Doctor relaxed at the unspoken reminder. It wasn’t his fault.

“Greyhound Six to Trap One,” Martha said into the walkie-talkie. “B Section, go, go, go. Search the ground floor. Grid pattern delta.”

“What are you searching for?” the Doctor asked as they followed the vehicles on foot.

“Illegal aliens.”

“This is a UNIT operation,” a voice announced over a loudspeaker. “All workers lay down your tools and surrender immediately.”

As Martha ran towards the building, shouting more orders into her walkie-talkie, the Doctor watched uniformed UNIT officers pull blue collar workers out of the factory and push them to the ground. His lips curled in a snarl. No one was using unnecessary force, but it was clear the workers were confused and frightened.

He was just considering who he might talk to about treating people with more respect when Martha walked back to them, her stride confident and purposeful. It was jarring to see the young woman who’d wanted to do nothing more than help people look so at home in the middle of a military operation.

Yeah, it is, Rose agreed. But let’s talk to her and find out why she’s working for UNIT, she suggested.

The Doctor looked down at her name badge and noticed something he’d just barely caught when they’d called her earlier.

“You’re qualified now. You’re a proper doctor.”

“Oh, that’s brilliant,” Rose said.

Martha smiled and pushed her hair back over her ear. “UNIT rushed it through, given… well, my experience in the field.” She shrugged and looked away for a moment, then motioned for them to follow her. “Here we go,” she said as they walked across the street to the command unit on wheels he’d watched roll by earlier. “We’re establishing a field base on site. They’re dying to meet you.”

“Wish I could say the same,” the Doctor muttered. He could already tell the Brigadier wasn’t in charge of this particular mission, and he’d never gotten on well with any of UNIT’s other commanders.

Be polite, Rose reminded him, and he pressed his lips into a thin line.

Martha either didn’t hear his sarcastic comment, or she chose to ignore it. She marched proudly into the mobile base and approached the same colonel the Doctor had spotted earlier. “Operation Blue Sky complete, sir. Thanks for letting me take the lead. And, this is the Doctor and Rose Tyler. Doctor, Rose; Colonel Mace.”

“Sir, Ma’am.” Colonel Mace snapped to attention and saluted.
“Oh, don’t salute,” the Doctor whined.

Colonel Mace tilted his head. “But it’s an honour, sir. I’ve read all the files on you.” He looked at Rose first. “The Brigadier was very impressed when he met you, ma’am. Said you were the perfect partner for the Doctor. ‘The only one who can keep up with him, and rein in his more harebrained schemes,’ I believe were the exact words he used.”

The Doctor was torn between indignation over the characterisation of his adventures, amusement at his old friend’s words, and pride in Rose. In the end, he settled for rolling his eyes, just as Colonel Mace looked back at him.


Donna’s eyes widened and she looked up at the Doctor. “What, you used to work for them?”

“Yeah, long time ago,” he admitted reluctantly. “Back in the 70’s. Or was it the 80’s?” He stood on his toes and looked over the colonel’s shoulder at the bank of computers lining one side of the small room. “But it was all a bit more homespun back then.”

“Times have changed, sir,” Colonel Mace said tactfully.

The whole military demeanour, including the constant use of “sir” and salutes, had just about robbed the Doctor of what was left of his patience. He opened his mouth to snarl at them, but Rose squeezed his hand gently, and instead, he took a deep breath and let her speak.

“There’s really no need to call the Doctor sir, Colonel.” she said smoothly. “I’m sure the Brig told you we don’t like to stand on ceremony. Our names are fine—the Doctor and Rose.”

He hesitated a moment, then nodded slowly. “Sir Alistair did say something along those lines,” he admitted. “Something about… the Doctor not appreciating all the military folderol.”

Rose’s humour brightened the Doctor’s mood. “That’s a fairly accurate representation,” she agreed.

The Doctor squeezed Rose’s hand in thanks. It seems the Brig was also right about you reining me in. Thank you, Rose.

He looked back at the tech support officers, hard at work on the computer terminals. The entire wall over their heads was a series of computer displays, each displaying different readouts.

“This is definitely different from what I remember,” he admitted.

Martha led them to one bank of computers. “We’ve got massive funding from the United Nations, all in the name of Homeworld Security.”

“A modern UNIT for the modern world,” Colonel Mace said proudly.

Watching from the sidelines—nearly ignored by everyone—Donna rolled her eyes. The military egos in this room were unbelievable. It had been on the tip of her tongue earlier to ask the Doctor if he turned his companions into soldiers, but she’d remembered Rose’s warning to not guilt trip him for things just in time.

But the attitude in this room was too much. Donna snorted, and the colonel turned to her, surprise and confusion on his face. Well, she’d tell him what she was thinking, soon enough. “What, and that means arresting ordinary factory workers, in the streets, in broad daylight?” She pointed towards the
outdoors. “It’s more like Guantanamo Bay out there. Donna, by the way,” she added, taking pleasure in the man’s baffled expression. “Donna Noble, since you didn’t ask. I’ll have a salute.” She might not have worked for UNIT since the 70s or 80s, but she still deserved respect.

The colonel turned to the Doctor and Rose, who both nodded, Rose while trying to hide a smile. The military man sighed as he turned back to her, but gave a sharp salute. “Ma’am.”

“How did they die?”

“They were all inside their cars,” said the Colonel.

“They were poisoned,” Martha elaborated. The Doctor sat up and looked at her. “I checked the biopsies. No toxins. Whatever it is left the system immediately.”

“What have the cars got in common?” the Doctor asked.

Completely different makes. They’re all fitted with ATMOS, and that is the ATMOS factory,” she concluded, tilting her head towards the military action going on outside.

Rose’s ponytail swished when she turned to look at Martha, a wrinkle between her eyebrows. “What’s ATMOS?”

Donna rolled her eyes. The entire conversation had left her feeling completely out of her depth, but at least she knew the answer to that. “Oh, come on. Even I know that. Everyone’s got ATMOS.”

Rose looked at her. “We don’t exactly have a car,” she said, like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

Martha chuckled. “You know, I’d forgotten how much you could sound like him sometimes.”

Donna had flinched at Rose’s tone, but she straightened up now and grinned at Martha. “Oh, I told her that just this morning! Finally, someone else who can see it, too.”

“All right!” The Doctor held up his hand. “I won’t ask—again—what’s so bad about sounding like me. Instead, I’ll just point out that so far, no one has actually answered our question about what ATMOS is. It seems like this is a bit time sensitive, if anyone would like to get on that?”

Martha rolled her eyes. “Yes, sir,” she muttered. “Come with me.”

Colonel Mace’s hand spasmed as they walked out, and Donna nudged the Doctor once they were
outside. “What’s so wrong with getting a salute?” she asked. “You’ve got that colonel all twitchy.”

The Doctor shoved his hands into his pockets as they followed Martha across the compound into the main part of the factory. “They tend to forget that I’m not actually military—don’t even really like military. Refusing all the military folderol, as the Brig put it, is a reminder.”

They took the lift to the upper level as soon as they were inside, and Donna frowned at the activity on the factory floor. Uniformed soldiers were leading people out of the building, their hands over their heads.

“ATMOS stands for Atmospheric Emission System,” Martha explained as they walked. “Fit ATMOS in your car, it reduces CO2 emissions to zero.”

“Zero?” the Doctor repeated, shocked. “No carbon, none at all?”

“And you get SatNav thrown in, plus twenty quid in shopping vouchers if you introduce a friend,” Donna added. “Bargain.”

Ahead of them, Colonel Mace stopped and gestured down at the factory. “And this is where they make it, Doctor. Shipping worldwide. Seventeen factories across the globe, but this is the central depot, sending ATMOS to every country on Earth.”

“And you think ATMOS is alien,” Rose concluded.

Colonel Mace smiled tightly. “It’s our job to investigate that possibility. Doctor?”

The Doctor stared down at the factory for a moment before following Colonel Mace and the others down the stairs. Donna’s comparison to Guantanamo Bay was unnervingly accurate. And it only got worse when they were on the ground floor and he could actually see the scared faces of the men and women being herded out of the factory. Were it not for the mysterious, simultaneous deaths the day before, he would have demanded their immediate release. Instead, he vowed to solve the mystery as soon as possible so these people could be freed.

Colonel Mace led the way through a plastic strip curtain into a lab and pointed at a smallish device resting on the table. “And here it is, laid bare. ATMOS can be threaded through any and every make of car.”

He picked up a model and the Doctor glanced down at it. “You must’ve checked it before it went on sale.”

“We did,” Martha assured him. “We found nothing. That’s why I thought we needed an expert.”

The Doctor pulled out his specs and slid them on. “Really. Who’d you get?”

A surge of amusement over the bond took him by surprise, and he looked at Rose, whose eyebrows were raised incredulously.

“Oh, right.” He rubbed at his neck. “Me, yes. Good.”

Martha shook her head and left the R&D lab, followed closely by Colonel Mace and the rest of the UNIT staff who’d joined them briefly.

The Doctor picked up one of the packaged models and turned it over, reading the description on the back. There was something… off about this whole concept.
“Okay. So why would aliens be so keen on cleaning up our atmosphere?” Donna asked, putting her finger on exactly the problem the Doctor had been trying to work out.

“A very good question,” he said. “Any ideas, Rose?”

Her jaw was tight, and she shook her head. “I’d love to think they just want to help us get rid of pollution, but I keep coming back to those mysterious deaths.”

“Exactly,” the Doctor agreed. “There are eight hundred million cars on planet Earth. Imagine that. If you could control them, you’d have eight hundred million weapons.”

He opened the box and pulled out the brand-new ATMOS device. “Let’s see how this works.” He took his sonic screwdriver out of his pocket and fiddled with the settings for a moment.

Donna sighed. “Look, this is your area,” she said. “I’m going to go… see if I can find some other way to help. I’ll be back.”

The Doctor looked at her over the rim of his glasses. “Are you sure?” he asked.

She rolled her eyes. “What am I going to do? Wave my phone at it and see if it gives me mobile coverage? Nah, I’ll find another way to get into trouble.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” the Doctor muttered, grunting when she smacked his shoulder. “Just… don’t wander off, all right? Stay nearby.”

“Fine, Spaceman,” she agreed, then left the tiny R&D lab.

“You’re staying?” he asked Rose, without looking up at her.

She snorted. “As if I’d leave.” She jumped up onto a counter and crossed her legs at the ankle. “I figure that while you scan that with the sonic, we can try to make sense of what we know so far.”

The Doctor scanned the device, then turned and leaned against the table, his arms crossed over his chest. “All right. The sonic will beep when the results are ready. What are you thinking, Rose?”

Rose tapped her nails on the counter. “You used the word control a few minutes ago,” she said. “You think that whoever is behind ATMOS has put some kind of hidden chip in the device that allows the vehicles to be controlled remotely.”

“Fifty-two people died yesterday,” he reminded her. “At the same moment.”

“Oh, I’m not disagreeing,” she said. “I just wanted to make sure I was following your train of thought.”

Her mood shifted slightly, and he braced himself for her next question. “Now, why are you so on edge? Because that’s got nothing to do with ATMOS.”

The Doctor sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose where his specs rubbed. “I’m not a fan of the military; you know that.”

“I do. I also know you’ve worked with and for UNIT before.”

“Remotely, or with the Brig as my liaison,” the Doctor countered. “I know the Brigadier. He’s a military man, but he understands the importance of science and thinking things through first. I can count on him not to make rash decisions that put everyone at unnecessary risk.”
Rose hesitated, and the Doctor raised an eyebrow. *Why do you think it’s so important that I’m courteous towards Colonel Mace?* he asked, keeping this part of their conversation private from any listening ears.

Rose jumped down off the counter and walked over to him. *Because if you antagonise him, he might not pay attention to you later when it’s important that he listen. Plus, Martha seems to trust him, and I trust Martha.*

The sonic screwdriver beeped before the Doctor could really work out all the angles of her argument and decide if he agreed with her. He read the results, then raised his eyebrows and turned around to look at the device.

“Oh really?” he muttered as he picked it up, turning it over in his hands.

Colonel Mace and Martha returned in time to hear that comment. “What did you discover, Doctor?” the colonel asked.

“Ionising nano-membrane carbon dioxide converter,” he told them. “Which means that ATMOS works. Filters the CO2 at a molecular level.” He whirled around and rested the ATMOS device on top of a Perspex model of a radiator, admiring the way it fit like it was designed to sit there.

Colonel Mace sighed impatiently. “We know all that, but what’s its origin? Is it alien?”

“No. Decades ahead of its time.”

The Doctor leaned over so he could look down the model tailpipe, visualising exactly what the ATMOS device did. Colonel Mace had followed him over to the model and loomed over his shoulder. The Doctor could see Mace’s gun out of the corner of his eye, and several insulting, cutting remarks came to mind. He *really* didn’t like guns, and he didn’t like having one this close to either him or Rose. He looked up at her, and she smiled encouragingly.

He took a deep breath and straightened up. “So this, this ATMOS thing. Where’d it come from?” he asked as he grabbed it and scanned it again.


The Doctor looked at him over the rim of his glasses. “And himself would be?”

Colonel Mace blinked a few times. “As soon as we’re done here, we can go back to HQ and I’ll show you his profile. I can tell you that while his personality is a bit… grating at times, he’s never given anyone in UNIT or the government reason to believe that he is anything other than what he seems.”

The Doctor held up the ATMOS device. “Just like this didn’t seem like anything other than a CO2 converter until it killed fifty-two people yesterday.”

The Colonel stiffened and nodded sharply. “Point made, Doctor.” He raised his hand halfway, then dropped his arm and spun around.

Rose sighed. “Well, that went better than it could have, at least.”

The Doctor looked back at her. “What? I didn’t say anything that wasn’t absolutely true.”

Martha huffed out a laugh. “You just implied that his intelligence operatives missed information so major, they’d let a threat to Homeworld security continue to walk free.”
The Doctor sniffed. “Well, if he’s so sensitive…”

Martha rolled her eyes. “He’s a good man.”

“He’s military, Martha,” the Doctor said, his voice flat. “His first instinct is to fight, when he should be trying to think of another way out of situations.”

Martha shook her head. “It’s all right for you. You can just come and go, but some of us have got to stay behind, deal with that clean-up that you always ignore. And sometimes, that means military action.”

The Doctor finally asked the question that had been bothering him since he’d spotted the UNIT trucks. “How did you come to be working for UNIT anyway, Martha?”

Amusement glinted in Martha’s eyes. “You got me the job, in a way. UNIT recruited me after reading over my debriefing from the year I walked the Earth.” She tilted her head and looked at him. “I always thought you put in a good word for me, but I guess not.”

The Doctor put the ATMOS device down. “Definitely not,” he said adamantly. “I wouldn’t even have thought you wanted to work someplace like UNIT. The last time we talked, you wanted to become a doctor and make the world a better place.”

Martha squared her shoulders. “Well, maybe the first thing I make better is UNIT. But the only way I can change them is by working from the inside.”

The Doctor smiled finally. “Yeah? That sounds more like you.”

She grinned. “I learned from the best.”

“Well.”

Martha nudge his shoulder. “Yeah, I meant Rose.”

Rose and Martha’s laughter at his expense was interrupted by Donna pushing her way back through the plastic flaps. “Oi, you lot.”

The Doctor blinked and looked up at her, standing with her hand on her hip and a binder in her hand.

“All your storm troopers and your sonics. You’re rubbish.” She shook her head, a tiny grin on her face, then walked towards them. “Should’ve come with me.”

“Why, where have you been?” the Doctor asked.

Donna’s smirk faltered slightly when Colonel Mace reentered the room, but she quickly reminded herself that she knew what she’d found was important.

“Personnel.” She nodded smartly. As soon as she’d spotted the folder, she’d known. “That’s where the weird stuff’s happening, in the paperwork. Because I spent years working as a temp. I can find my way round an office blindfolded, and the first thing I noticed is an empty file.”

“Why, what’s inside it?” the Doctor asked, then quickly corrected himself. “Or what’s not inside it?”

Everyone in the room was looking at Donna, but for once, she didn’t feel like they were waiting for her to mess up. And she was right about this—she knew she was.
“Sick days,” she explained. “There aren’t any. Hundreds of people working here and no one’s sick. Not one hangover, man flu, sneaky little shopping trip, nothing.” It was gratifying to watch the shock and concern on their faces as they slowly realised what she was saying. “Not ever. They don’t get ill.”

The colonel stepped towards her and grabbed the empty file. “That can’t be right,” he insisted, opening the file and staring at it, as if it would suddenly be full once it was in his hands.

“You’ve been checking out the building.” She tilted her chin up proudly. “Should’ve been checking out the workforce.”

Martha Jones was the first to smile at her. “I can see why he likes you.”

The praise from someone who barely knew her made Donna stand up straighter.

“You are good,” Martha concluded.

“Super temp.”

Colonel Mace nodded. “Dr. Jones, set up a medical post. Start examining the workers.” He handed the empty file to Martha, then headed for the door. “I’ll get them sent through.”

“Come on, Donna,” Martha invited. “Give me a hand.”

Rose hopped off the counter as Donna and Martha left the room, and the Doctor beamed at her. “All right then, Rose Tyler.” He snagged the ATMOS device in one hand and and took her hand with his other. “Allons-y!” They grinned at each other and ran after Colonel Mace.

They caught up with him halfway to the factory door. “Can you tell me more about this Luke Rattigan?” the Doctor asked.

The colonel nodded. “We can pull his file up when we reach the mobile HQ.” He shot the Doctor a sidelong glance. “We have kept tabs on him, you know Doctor. You made it sound earlier like we’d just let someone… wander free, wreaking all kinds of havoc on the world.”

The Doctor scratched at his sideburn. “I’m sure you have,” he said, sincerely for once. “I just have a feeling that you’ve missed something. Because it all comes back to him, doesn’t it?”

Colonel Mace pursed his lips, but nodded reluctantly. “You appear to be correct about that,” he agreed as they stepped out into the sunshine.

The Doctor waited impatiently for them to pull up the file and get it projected on the screen, but then a weaselly face with a sharp chin and beady eyes appeared, and he straightened up.

“Child genius,” Mace said, narrating the information onscreen, even though the Doctor could read it faster than he could talk. “Invented the Fountain Six search engine when he was twelve years old. Millionaire overnight. Now runs the Rattigan Academy. A private school, educating students handpicked from all over the world.”

“A hothouse for geniuses. Wouldn’t mind going there.”

Rose put a hand to her chest and pouted. “Are you saying I’m not clever enough for you, Doctor?”

“No! Rose, you…”

Her bubbly humour caught up with him just a few seconds too late, and he let out a long breath of
relief. “Not fair, Rose Tyler. That wasn’t fair at all.”

For the first time since they’d met him, Colonel Mace cracked a real smile. “I believe I understand what Sir Alistair meant when he said you were the Doctor’s perfect match, ma’am.”

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Down in Human Resources, Martha immediately dug into the files. Donna watched for a moment, the rush of finding a mystery almost completely worn off, now that it seemed like she wasn’t needed anymore.

At the same time, a thought that had been building in the back of her mind finally pushed its way forward. “Do you think I should warn my mum about the ATMOS in her car?”

“Better safe than sorry,” Martha said briskly as she stood up.

Donna looked closely at the other woman. Martha was smiling, but along with the encouragement, there was something like wistfulness in her eyes. I wonder what she’s thinking about, she thought, then said out loud, “I’ll give her a call.”

She was almost to the door when Martha called her back. “Donna. Do they know where you are? Your family. I mean, that you’re travelling with the Doctor?

Donna frowned. “Not really.” A memory returned, and a tiny smile crept across her face. “Although, my granddad sort of waved us off. I didn’t have time to explain.”

Martha nodded slightly, like that was the answer she’d expected. “You just left him behind?”

“Yeah.” There was something in the words, in the way Martha said it, that sounded like an accusation, and guilt choked her. She hadn’t even thought about her family since then, not until today, when they were back in London.

Martha sighed. “You need to tell them. At least let them know you’re doing something that might be dangerous. I kept it from my family—thought it didn’t matter, because I was going to come straight back on the same day I left, so why bother explaining that I’d been travelling? And…” She pressed her lips together, then nodded firmly. “Just tell them. Don’t let them find out from someone else, or in the wrong way.”

Donna stared at the other woman, a little unnerved. It wasn’t that she hadn’t considered it might be a good idea to let her family know she was off having an adventure; it was just… easier to not tell her mum. Even now, with the veiled warning from a previous companion, she shuddered at the thought of how Sylvia would react.

“I’m serious,” Martha pressed. “Look, if you’re not sure, ask Rose what happened the first time she came home. Believe me, you don’t want something like that to happen.”

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Colonel Mace followed after the Doctor as they walked through the complex. “Doctor, I really think it would be wise of you to take an escort with you. If Luke Rattigan is involved, as you think he is…”

The Doctor shook his head. “I want to talk to this Luke Rattigan, not point a gun at him.” He glanced up at the colonel. “No offence.”
“None taken,” he said, though his tight smile suggested otherwise. “It’s ten miles outside London. How are you going to get there?”

“Well then, get me a Jeep,” the Doctor suggested, waving at the vehicles nearby.

“According to the records you travel by TARDIS,” the man countered.

“We do,” Rose agreed, “but she’s not really a London Hopper—she’s more a long-haul vehicle. Plus, to be honest Colonel, if Luke Rattigan is involved in the mess here, I’d like to keep the TARDIS as far from him as possible.” She wrinkled her nose. “I know too many geniuses. He’d probably try to take her apart.”

Colonel Mace nodded. “Fair enough. However, if you’re going to take a UNIT vehicle, you’ll have to have at least one officer with you to drive. Is that acceptable?”

The Doctor nodded. “Yes, yes. Can we just hurry up? I have a feeling that time is of the essence.”

The colonel held up his hand. “Jenkins?” he called.

“Sir.” A private by one of the Jeeps looked up.

“You will accompany the Doctor and Miss Tyler, and take orders from them.”

The Doctor opened his mouth to be difficult, but then snapped it shut when he remembered Rose’s comment about wanting to have the colonel willing to listen to them when it became necessary.

Colonel Mace looked from the Doctor to Rose and back again. “Any sign of trouble, get Jenkins to declare a Code Red. And good luck, sir.” He snapped a quick salute, then left before the Doctor could complain.

*Good job, Doctor,* Rose told him, taking his hand and squeezing.

“Doctor.”

He spun around and ran towards Donna. “Oh, just in time.” He grabbed her hand and started pulling her towards the Jeep. “Come on, come on, we’re going to the country. Fresh air and geniuses, what more could you ask?”

Donna dug in her heels and forced them to stop. “I’m not coming with you.”

The Doctor looked down at her and his hearts sank. She looked so… so homesick, so forlorn. This day always came—or usually, at least—but he’d expected more than a month with Donna.

“I’ve been thinking,” she continued, saying the words he knew were coming. “I’m sorry. I’m going home.”

“Really?”

Her eyes were downcast, and there were tiny lines around the corners of her mouth. “I’ve got to.”

The Doctor nodded. He’d never keep anyone against their will, even if it hurt to watch them go. “Oh, if that’s what you want. I mean, it’s a bit soon. I had so many places I had wanted to take you. The Fifteenth Broken Moon of the Medusa Cascade, the Lightning Skies of Cotter Palluni’s World…”

Laughter cut him off, and he looked over at Rose, leaning on a Jeep, one arm wrapped around her
waist as she laughed, hard. He frowned; that wasn’t the reaction he’d expected from her when their companions left.

And the penny dropped. He swallowed and looked back at Donna, feeling his face grow hot. “You’re just popping home for a visit, that’s what you mean.”

She nodded, a wide smirk on her face. “You dumbo.”

The Doctor tugged on his ear. “And then you’re coming back.”

“Know what you are? A great big outer space dunce.”

“Yeah.” The Doctor couldn’t argue with that. Why had he thought Donna would be ready to leave so soon?

“Ready when you are, sir, ma’am.”

The Doctor was glad of Private Jenkins’ interruption, though looking at Rose and Donna, he didn’t think either woman was going to let him live this down for a very long time.

Donna grinned at him. “What’s more, you can give me a lift,” she said as she jogged around to the other side of the Jeep. “Come on. Broken moon of what?” she asked as they climbed in.

“I haven’t even been to all those places you listed, Doctor,” Rose interjected.

“But I’ve taken you places I didn’t mention,” he protested. “How many places have we gone together, Rose Tyler?”

Rose tilted her head back and pretended to count as Ross started the Jeep and drove them out of the vehicle bay. “Oh, I think we were closing in on a thousand at the last count, weren’t we?”

He wrapped an arm around her shoulders and pulled her close, so there was room for all of them in the backseat. “I think so.”

Donna snorted. “I see you still cuddle together in the backseat of cars, just like you did last Christmas.”

The Doctor rolled his eyes, and a puckish instinct stirred. Rose? Understanding his question, she turned slightly and tilted her head back as he leaned down. He bumped his nose against hers, then muffled her soft giggle with a kiss, starting a clock in his head as soon as their lips met.

Rose’s lips curved up in a smile, then she adjusted the kiss so she had his lower lip between hers. The Doctor sighed when he felt her hand curve around the back of his neck to hold him close.

They’d only been kissing for twenty seconds when Donna groaned. “All right, you’ve made your point!” she grumbled loudly.

The Doctor eased out of the kiss, then smirked at Donna. “A little cuddle doesn’t seem so bad now, does it?”

Donna pulled a face, then ignored him and looked at Rose. “Oh! Rose. Martha said I should ask you about your first visit home after you started travelling with the Doctor.”

The Doctor felt any ground he’d gained disappear, and he groaned. “Before she answers, I want you to know that the TARDIS arranged that. It was all her idea.”
Rose arched an eyebrow. “You’ll have to explain that later,” she said, then turned to Donna. “We’d gone on a few trips, been gone from home for maybe… two weeks?” She looked up at the Doctor, and he nodded. “And I thought it would be a good idea to go home, get some clothes, let my mum know that I’d be gone for a while. Because I’d already decided I wasn’t going to go back until he made me.”

The Doctor blinked; he’d never heard that part of the story. He watched Rose’s cheeks turned pink as she caught his surprise and realised what she’d just given away.

“Anyway,” she said hurriedly, “he took me back to London—said it had only been twelve hours.”

“Oh, my God,” Donna said. “How long had it really been? Twelve weeks?”

Rose shook her head. “Months, Donna. Twelve months.”

Donna’s jaw dropped. “A full year? He brought you home a full year late?”

Rose nodded and looked up at her. “My mum had missing posters up and everything. So if you’re wondering if you should tell her, my advice is yes.”

“Blimey! I didn’t even think of that possibility.” She nodded. “I’ll think of something to tell her, then.”

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Martha sighed. Trading out the black leather jacket for her white lab coat had felt like she was getting back into her own skin for the first time all day. After nearly two years with the Doctor and Rose, she didn’t think she could have gone to a typical hospital job—she was too used to the rush of adventure—but this part of her job was still what she liked best, when she got to actually care for patients.

A young ensign handed her a file when she reached the room they’d set up as an exam room. Martha glanced at it, then nodded and handed it back before walking into the room.

“I’m Dr. Jones,” she said as she sat down across from the young man. Her hair fell into her face, and she immediately grabbed a barrette out of her pocket to secure it. “And your name’s Trepper, yeah? Is that Polish? Listen, we’re not checking passports,” she assured him, realising a moment too late that her attempt at making conversation might scare an undocumented worker into staying quiet. “It’s not about that. But did you come across from Poland just to work?”

Trepper didn’t blink. “I came to do my job.”

“Okay.” Martha nodded slowly. “I need to listen to your heartbeat.” She rubbed the bell of her stethoscope against her hand. “This might be a bit cold. Lift.”

Still showing absolutely no affect at all, Trepper lifted his shirt. Martha pressed the stethoscope to his chest and had to work to keep her expression even; his heart was racing. “Are you on any medication?” she asked, thinking of a few that caused tachycardia.

“I’m here to work,” Trepper recited.

Martha furrowed her brow. If he’d been overworked, if he was an undocumented alien who didn’t know he had rights, the overwork could have affected his heart. “How many hours a day do you work?”
“Twenty-four,” Trepper said in a flat voice.

Martha blinked; there was no way this man had been working twenty-four hours a day. He wouldn’t still be standing if he had. “You work twenty-four hours a day?” she asked, then realised she hadn’t told him he could put his shirt down. “Down.”

Trepper obeyed automatically, and Martha got an inkling of what might be going on. She leaned forward in her seat and looked at the man, who still gave absolutely no reaction to her presence.

“Mr. Trepper, have you ever had any form of hypnosis?”

“I’m here to work,” he repeated.

And that was enough for Martha. She nodded slowly, then got to her feet. “Okay. Er, if you could just wait here.”

“I’ll be right back,” she told the officer standing outside the room. “Make sure he doesn’t go anywhere, all right? He’s not in trouble,” she said quickly. “He just has information I think Colonel Mace will want to hear.”

The young soldiers saluted quickly, and Martha started towards headquarters at a brisk pace. She was halfway there when she heard someone call her name behind her. When she glanced over her shoulder, she saw two soldiers, and she shook her head.

“Not now, I’m busy.”

“Just one question,” the taller one said. “Do you have security clearance level one?”

Martha stopped and frowned slightly. “Yes, I do. Why?”

“Colonel Mace wants to see you,” he told her.

*Well that makes things easy.* “Oh good, because I want to see him. Where is he?”

“Come with us.” They turned around and walked in the opposite direction she’d expected to find the colonel in.

Later, she’d be embarrassed to admit that she wasn’t suspicious until they led her through an abandoned basement corridor. “What’s he doing down here?” she asked, keeping her voice even while subtly glancing around for a way out.

“He asked to see you,” the soldier repeated, definitively.

“Why?” Martha asked, now more curious than suspicious. “Has he found something?”

They opened a door and she strode through it, but instead of finding Colonel Mace, perhaps along with some of his higher ranking officers, she found an empty room filled with a pool of green slime.

She took a deep breath, then spun around and ran for the door, but the two soldiers were too strong. She was trapped.
Donna watched out the Jeep window as the streets grew more familiar. This winter had been the mild kind, where the autumn leaves lingered on the streets and clung determinedly to the trees into February. The unseasonal appearance made it feel like she’d been gone for months, rather than a few weeks, and her anxiety to get home grew.

“You can stop here,” she finally called out when they reached the closest junction to her home.

Private Jenkins looked at her in the rear view mirror. “Are you certain, ma’am?”

Donna nodded. “Yeah. If you let me out at this corner, you can just turned around there and go out to this Rattigan Academy.”

He turned his indicator on and pulled over, and Donna had the door open before the Jeep had even come to a complete stop. “I’ll walk the rest of the way. I’ll see you back at the factory, yeah?”

The Doctor pulled the door shut. “All right.”

Donna bent down slightly so she could see him and Rose. “And you be careful! Both of you.”

Rose grinned and waved merrily, and then the Jeep drove off. “Trouble magnets,” Donna muttered before she started down the road.

The first person she saw was Elaine, who lived two doors down and had tormented her mother last summer with her perfect hydrangeas. “Haven’t seen you for days,” the older woman said.

Donna laughed slightly. Had it only been days? “Yeah. Been away.”

She kept walking, seeing memories of the last few weeks instead of the familiar cars that lined the street. She’d done so much in a short amount of time—nearly died, falling out of that window cleaner’s bucket, saved one family from the fires of Pompeii, rescued an entire species that had been subjugated by humans… She’d stood beneath alien skies and danced at alien balls.

And while she’d been doing that, life had gone on as usual here in Chiswick. Elaine still took her walk every afternoon, the kids still played footie after school...

Donna was almost to her own home, and she pressed her hand to her mouth when she spotted her grandfather carrying the rubbish to the kerb. He saw her at the same time and held up his hands and waved, as if she couldn’t see him. Donna took one small step, then another, and then she ran the rest of the way to him.

They met at the end of the driveway, and he immediately wrapped his arms around her for a fierce hug. The familiar scent of his aftershave hit Donna hard and she had to clench her eyes shut to hold back tears. In all her travels, hugs from her granddad were the one thing she really missed from home.

After a long hug, he pulled back and tugged her towards the house. “Come on. We’ll have a cuppa and you can tell me all about your adventures.”

“Yeah.” Donna wrapped her arm around his waist and rested her head on his shoulder as they walked slowly into the house.
Inside, she tried to help make tea, but he waved her off. “Oh no,” he said, pointing at the table. “You sit down! It’s not every day I have a visitor from outer space.”

Donna rolled her eyes. “I’m still from Chiswick, Gramps.”

He looked at her over his shoulder as he dropped teabags into the mugs he had out. “But you’ve been travelling in outer space.”

She sat down. “Yeah. We went to this planet called the Ood Sphere and met proper aliens.”

The kettle went off and her grandfather poured the water, then brought both mugs over to the table. “Like, proper aliens,” she emphasised, “with tentacles growing around their mouths like a beard.”

He sat down across from her and fidgeted with his sideburn. “I said so, didn’t I. Aliens. I said they was real. I just didn’t expect them in a little blue box.”

“It’s bigger on the inside,” Donna explained automatically.

“Yes, but is it safe?” His expression took on a stern demeanour. “This couple you’re traveling with, the Doctor and Rose, are you safe with them?”

Donna nodded earnestly. “They’re amazing, Gramps. Really. They’re just… dazzling.” She paused and looked at the ceiling for a moment. “You can tell Rose I said that, but not him.”

He hid a grin behind his hand. “No.”

“But I’d trust them with my life,” Donna admitted.

Her granddad straightened, an affronted frown on his face. “Hold up, I thought that was my job.”

Donna wrapped her hands around her mug and leaned forward. “You still come first.”

“Well, for God’s sake, don’t tell your mother.”

Donna pressed her lips into a thin line. She still wasn’t keen on the idea, but after listening to Rose and Martha’s stories, she didn’t know how she could keep it a secret.

“I don’t know.” She wavered between the two options. “I mean, this is massive. Sort of not fair if she doesn’t know.”

“Doesn’t know what?”

Donna straightened and watched her mother walk through the room, carrying a laundry basket. Sylvia set the basket down on the counter, and Donna rested her chin in her hand and listened as her mum started in on her while folding a blanket.

“And who’s she, the cat’s mother? And where’ve you been these past few days, lady, after that silly little trick with the car keys? I phoned Veena and she said she hadn’t seen hide nor hair.”

The condescension in her mum’s voice stung even worse now that she was actually doing something with her life. Her wounded pride was aching to tell her mother exactly what she’d been doing, but her gramps shook his head quickly and she sighed.

“I’ve just been travelling,” she hedged.
Her mum scoffed at that. “Oh, hark at her, Michael Palin.”

Donna and her Gramps shared a look, and he started laughing.

Sylvia kept right on, barely stopping for breath between one passive aggressive comment and the next. “Are you staying for tea, because I haven’t got anything in. I’ve been trying to keep your granddad on that macrobiotic diet, but he sneaks off and gets pork pies at the petrol station.” Gramps turned around with his hand raised, but her mum shook her head. “Don’t deny it, I’ve seen the wrappers in the car. Oh, I don’t miss a trick. Now then, what were you going to tell me? What don’t I know?”

Donna and her granddad shared a conspiratorial chuckle and wink. But that little tirade had been enough to decide Donna. She could only imagine the kind of ridicule she’d get from her mother if she tried to tell her she travelled through time and space with an alien and his part-alien wife. *She probably wouldn’t even believe me if she saw the inside of the TARDIS.*

She started to smile, imaging the way her mum would react if she walked into the unique spaceship, but her amusement faded when she realised how closely the picture in her head matched the way *she* had reacted when she’d first landed in the TARDIS.

Donna shook her head to get rid of the notion, then smiled and shook her head at her mum. “Nothing. Just nothing.”

“Good. Right, then you can sit there and cut out those coupons. Every penny helps. This new mortgage doesn’t pay for itself. Dad, kettle on.”

“Yeah, kettle on.”

Donna took the flyers she was handed, and as she cut out the coupons, she wondered if there would ever come a day when her mother actually saw her value, or if visits home would always go like this.

“OoOoOoOoOo

“We’re almost there. The school is very secluded,” Ross told the Doctor and Rose as he turned the Jeep off the main road. “UNIT’s been watching Rattigan Academy for ages. It’s all a bit Hitler Youth. Exercise at dawn and classes and special diets.”

“Turn left.”

The constant interruptions from ATMOS had been driving the Doctor batty, and he finally had to ask. “Ross, one question. If UNIT think that ATMOS is dodgy—”

“Go straight on.”

“How come we’ve got it in the Jeeps?”

“Yeah,” Rose said.

Ross chuckled mirthlessly. “Tell me about it. They’re fitted as standard on all government vehicles. We can’t get rid of them till we can prove there’s something wrong.”

The Doctor watched the display warily as ATMOS instructed Ross to turn right. He had yet to find an instance where ubiquitous technology had not proven disastrous for humanity.

“Drives me around the bend,” Ross said slyly.
Rose and the Doctor chuckled. “Oh, nice one,” she praised.

Ross shot them a cheeky smile as he followed the curve of the road. “Timed that perfectly.”

The Doctor nodded. “Yeah. Yeah, you did.”

They turned another bend, and a large manor house came into view. The Doctor’s eyebrows rose as he took in the numerous towers and turrets rising above the Gothic revival castle. The pale golden colour of Bath Stone was mostly obscured by a layer of grime, but here and there it shone through.

“This is your final destination,” ATMOS announced as Ross parked and they all climbed out.

“Blimey, I see what you meant, Ross,” Rose muttered. Teens in matching orange tracksuits were running laps around the building.

The Doctor nodded. “Yeah... definitely something off here. And I think I see the man in charge over there,” he said, nodding to a slight figure standing off to the side, dressed in jeans and a maroon t-shirt.

“Is it PE?” he called out. “I wouldn’t mind a kick around—I’ve got me daps on.”

Luke Rattigan turned around, no smile on his face. “I suppose you’re the Doctor and Rose Tyler?”

“Hello,” they said, waving in sync.

The young man’s eyes narrowed. “Your commanding officer phoned ahead.”

“Ah, but we haven’t got a commanding officer,” the Doctor corrected. “Have you?” Luke rocked back on his heels, deep offence etched on his face, and the Doctor was pretty certain he was behind whatever was going on.

But he couldn’t let on that he’d sussed him out so quickly, so he gestured to Ross. “Oh, this is Ross. Say hello, Ross.”

“Good afternoon, sir,” Ross said politely.

The Doctor took Rose’s hand and they jogged towards the mansion. “Let’s have a look, then. I can smell genius!” He grinned at Luke over his shoulder. “In a good way.”

What are you thinking, Doctor? Rose asked as they allowed Luke Rattigan to lead them to a large, open room on the first floor.

The amount of arrogance pouring off that boy is almost never a good thing, the Doctor said gravely.

“This is what I call the visioning lab,” Luke said as he approached a door with yellow plastic flaps hanging in front of it. “Because in this room, if our students can envision something, we make it happen.”

The Doctor pushed through the flaps and his eyes widened. “Oh, now, that’s clever. Look.” He put on his specs as he bent over one experiment. “Single molecule fabric, how thin is that?!?” He turned to Ross and Rose. “You could pack a tent in a thimble.”

Despite his awareness that there was something going on here, he couldn’t help but bounce around the room like a kid in a candy shop, going from one advanced product to another. “Ooo! Gravity simulators. Terraforming, biospheres, nano-tech steel construction.” He laughed when a flame spurted. “This is brilliant.”
But as exciting as it all was, it was also obvious to him exactly what this set of products could do together. He sauntered back towards Luke Rattigan, who didn’t look nearly as arrogant now as he had before. “Do you know, with equipment like this you could, ooo, I don’t know, move to another planet or something?”

Luke pressed his lips together in the most faked wistful gaze the Doctor had ever seen. “If only that was possible.”

“If only that were possible,” the Doctor corrected as he took his glasses off and put them back in his pocket. Luke glared at him balefully, and the Doctor offered a helpful explanation. “Conditional clause.”

He watched carefully as the lad utterly failed at controlling his anger. Oh, he’s a bit more dangerous than I thought, Rose.

“I think you’d better come with me,” Luke said curtly, then strode out of the room.

He’s definitely in a bit of a strop, isn’t he? Rose asked as they trailed behind Luke.

More than a bit. Luke Rattigan has delusions of grandeur, and I think someone else has been playing into that. Because all that stuff in his visioning lab? None of that is technology Earth should have yet.

Luke led them into a large, open room with a swimming pool in the middle of it. He stopped in front of a stone fireplace and glared at the Doctor. “You’re smarter than the usual UNIT grunts, I’ll give you that.”

“He called you a grunt.” The Doctor looked casually around the room and forced himself not to react to the transmat unit in the corner. “Don’t call Ross a grunt. He’s nice. We like Ross. Look at this place, Rose.”

“Very nice, very posh,” Rose agreed as they both started circling the room, acting like home buyers considering the light in the room. What did you see, Doctor?

When Luke closed his eyes and pressed his hands to his temples, the Doctor nodded at the large box near the wall.

That’s a teleport. Definitely not human technology.

Luke dropped his hands and glared at them. “What exactly do you want?”

The Doctor walked straight for the teleport device, though he did so casually, turning around and walking backwards a few steps. “I was just thinking. What a responsible eighteen-year-old.” He walked straight past the teleport to poke his head out into the hallway, looking for anyone who didn’t belong on Earth at this time. “Inventing zero carbon cars? Saving the world.”


“I don’t know about that, mate,” Rose disagreed. “Because here’s what I’ve been thinking. If people think they can drive their car without sending carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, then they’re just gonna buy more cars, aren’t they? And the thing is, the cars still run on petrol, whether they release emissions or not. So in the end, we’re still going to run out of oil… maybe even faster than before.”

The Doctor nodded. “Rose is right. The ATMOS system could make things worse.”

Luke darted over to them, his hand held out. “Yeah. Well, you see, that’s a tautology. You can’t say ATMOS system because it stands for Atmospheric Emissions System. So you’re just saying
Atmospheric Emissions System. Do you see, Mr. Conditional Clause?” he scoffed, holding up his hands in fake quotation marks.

Rose snorted and put her hands on her hips. “You sound like a bratty eight-year-old right now, Luke, do you know that? You’re not the cleverest person in the room for once, and you can’t stand it.”

That took the wind right out of his sails, but Luke still rallied enough to insist, “I’m still right, though.”

“Not easy, is it, being clever.” The Doctor held Luke’s gaze until the lad looked away, and then he took a step towards him, forcing his attention back to him. “You look at the world and you connect things, random things, and think, ‘Why can’t anyone else see it?’ The rest of the world is so slow.”


“And you’re all on your own,” the Doctor continued.

Luke looked down quickly, then met the Doctor’s gaze again, naked pain and anger in his eyes. “I know.”

“But not with this.” The Doctor pulled the ATMOS device out of his pocket and waved it around as he backed up a few steps. “Because there’s no way you invented this thing single-handed. I mean, it might be Earth technology, but that’s like finding a mobile phone in the Middle Ages.” He tossed it to Rose and walked over to the teleport. “No, no, I’ll tell you what it’s like. It’s like finding this in the middle of someone’s front room. Albeit it’s a very big front room.”

“Why, what is it?” Ross asked.

“Yeah, just looks like a thing, doesn’t it?” the Doctor remarked. “People don’t question things. They just say, ‘Oh, it’s a thing.’”


The Doctor stepped back into the purple-lit chamber. “Me, I make these connections,” he said, drawing circles in the air on the side of his head. “And this, to me, looks like a teleport pod.” He pushed the button and felt the familiar static electricity that accompanied a teleport.

When he rematerialised, he looked around and his eyes widened immediately. “Oh.” They were a little shorter than they had been the last time he’d seen them, but this was clearly a Sontaran ship. Rose, you need to find cover. I’ll be bringing company with me when I come back.

The Sontarans noticed him almost immediately and turned to face him. “We have an intruder,” one announced.

“How did he get in?” the Doctor asked. “In tru da window? Bye, bye!” He punched the return button and started running as his body left the ship, knowing he would rematerialise at a run, too.

“Ross, get out!” he shouted as he ran back into the room. He could feel Rose behind him, near the door, so he grabbed Luke and tried to pull him that direction. “Luke, you’ve got to come with me,” he said.

When the teen resisted, the Doctor rolled his eyes, then spun around with his sonic screwdriver out. A single soldier appeared in the room before he deactivated the teleport unit, but one soldier he could handle.
“Sontaran!” he shouted as the alien stepped forward. “That’s your name, isn’t it? You’re a Sontaran.” The soldier cocked his head and lowered his weapon. “How did I know that, hey? Fascinating isn’t it? Isn’t that worth keeping me alive?”

Ross stepped forward, his gun drawn. “I order you to surrender in the name of the Unified Intelligence Taskforce.”

The Doctor looked down at the sidearm. “Well that’s not going to work,” he muttered. “Cordolaine signal, am I right?” he called out to the Sontaran. Ross looked up at him, and he pointed to the barrel of the gun. “Copper excitation stopping the bullets.”

“How do you know so much?” the Sontaran demanded.

“Well.” The Doctor shrugged and looked at the ceiling.

*What can I do?* Rose asked as the Doctor spun and walked over to a desk.

“Who is he?” asked the Sontaran.

“He didn’t give his name,” Luke told the Sontaran.

Rose was perfectly positioned to incapacitate the Sontaran, assuming Luke didn’t give away her position. *Stay right there. I’m working on a plan.*

The Doctor turned around and leaned against the desk. “But this isn’t typical Sontaran behaviour, is it? Hiding?” He sneered, then nodded at Luke. “Using teenagers, stopping bullets? A Sontaran should face bullets with dignity. Shame on you.”

“You dishonour me, sir!”

The Doctor smirked; they really made it too easy. “Yeah? Then show yourself.”

“I will look into my enemy’s eyes!” He removed his helmet, revealing both his face and the vulnerable probic vent at the back of his neck.

“Oh, my God,” muttered Ross.

The Doctor nodded at the weathered-looking Sontaran. This was no inexperienced soldier. “And your name?”

“General Staal, of the Tenth Sontaran Fleet. Staal the Undefeated.”

The Doctor sighed. “Oh, that’s not a very good nickname. What if you do get defeated? Staal the Not-Quite-So-Undefeated-Anymore-But Never-Mind?”

Behind Staal, Rose rolled her eyes and stifled a giggle.

“He’s like a potato,” Ross said. “A baked potato. A talking baked potato.”

“Now, Ross, don’t be rude,” the Doctor chided as he straightened up. “You look like a pink weasel to him.”

He picked up the squash racket and ball nonchalantly. *Rose, while I distract everyone, find something you can club Staal with.*

“The Sontarans are the finest soldiers in the galaxy,” he explained as he bounced the ball on the
racket, “dedicated to a life of warfare. A clone race, grown in batches of millions with only one weakness.”

To anyone watching, it would have seemed like he was explaining to the entire room, but Rose’s attention sharpened and he knew she was ready for his instructions.

*I’ve got a cricket bat, Doctor.*

General Staal recoiled. “Sontarans have no weakness,” he growled.

“No, it’s a good weakness,” the Doctor assured him.

Luke glared back at him. “Aren’t you meant to be clever? Only an idiot would provoke him,” he said, looking at Staal again.

The Doctor sighed. He was as sure as he could be now that Luke had been willingly working for the Sontarans. Well, having a Sontaran teleport pod in his front room was a rather big clue, honestly.

“No, but the Sontarans are fed by a probic vent in the back of their neck.” He pointed at the back of his neck with the racket. “That’s their weak spot. Which means, they always have to face their enemies in battle. Isn’t that brilliant?” He grinned. “They can never turn their backs.”

“We stare into the face of death,” Staal declared bombastically.

Rose stepped out from behind the teleport, her cricket bat in hand. She swung it up and hit Staal square on the probic vent, growling, “Bet you didn’t see that coming, mate,” as he crumpled to the floor in a pile of armour.

“Run!” the Doctor yelled at Ross. He grabbed Rose’s hand on the way out of the room, and the three of them dashed to the Jeep.

“Get us out of here,” the Doctor ordered Ross. “And call Colonel Mace when you get a chance, tell him Code Red, Sontarans.”

Ross nodded as they took off. “So these Sontarans, they’re behind ATMOS?” he asked as the Jeep skidded around a curve.

The Doctor grabbed onto the dash. “Yeah, seems like it.” He raked his hand through his hair; the more they learned, the less things made sense. This wasn’t typical Sontaran behaviour at all.

Ross yanked the wheel hard when they reached the main road, then he reached into the glove compartment and pulled out a walkie-talkie. “I’ll let you contact the colonel yourself, sir.”

The Doctor grabbed the device and brought it to his mouth. “Greyhound Forty to Trap One. Repeat, can you hear me? Over.” He waited a few minutes, then tried again, and again when he still didn’t get an answer.

Rose pulled his arm down. “The Sontarans must be blocking the signal,” she said, saying aloud the conclusion he’d already reached. “No point trying it over and over.”

The Doctor tossed the walkie-talkie down in disgust and rubbed at the headache building behind his eyes. “And if they can trace that, they can isolate the ATMOS.”

“*Turn left.*”

The cheery voice of ATMOS sent a mutual shiver of dread through the Doctor and Rose.
Rose licked her lips. “Try going right,” she suggested to Ross.

He glanced over at her. “It said left.”

“That’s my point,” Rose said. “Try to go right instead.”

Ross sighed, but a moment later he took his hands off the wheel, his eyes wide. “I’ve got no control.” The Jeep stayed on the road, even though no one had the wheel. “It’s driving itself. It won’t stop.” He grabbed at the door. “The doors are locked.”

The Doctor had pulled his sonic out and started working on the ATMOS unit as soon as Ross took his hands off the wheel, but he wasn’t getting anywhere. “Ah, it’s deadlocked. I can’t stop it.”

“Let me.” Ross pulled out the wire that connected the SatNav to the steering wheel, but ATMOS kept giving directions.

“The SatNav’s just a box wired through the whole car,” the Doctor explained as they veered off the road.

The Doctor felt a spark of intuition from Rose, and he looked at her as she leaned forward, speaking directly to the ATMOS device. “ATMOS, are you programmed to do the opposite of whatever I say?”

“We’re headed for the river,” Ross announced unnecessarily.

“Confirmed,” ATMOS declared.

Rose nodded and licked her lips. “Anything I say, you’ll ignore it?”

“Confirmed.”

“Right. Then drive this Jeep straight into the river.”

They all held their breath during the brief pause before the Jeep screeched to a halt, ten feet from the riverbank. The locks popped open, and all three of them piled out of the vehicle as the confused ATMOS gave rapidly conflicting orders.

“Get down!” the Doctor ordered, throwing himself to the ground and wrapping a protective arm around Rose.

“Left, right, left, right, left, right, left, right, left, right.”

The Doctor held his breath and waited for the explosion as the ATMOS device overloaded. Instead, a moment later he heard a soft pop and sizzle, like a circuit blowing.

He lifted his head cautiously. ATMOS wasn’t talking anymore, which seemed to indicate it had died. Not with a bang, but with a whimper.

“Oh, was that it?” the Doctor mumbled.

Rose pushed herself up. “You know what this means?”

“Angry potatoes intent on taking over the world using its obsession with automobiles are likely to launch their strike early, since they know we’re onto them? And our one advantage is that they probably think we’re dead.”
She blinked. “Well… that too, I guess. But I was gonna point out that we don’t have a vehicle.”

The Doctor groaned. “City buses it is. We’ll go to Donna’s—it’s closer than the ATMOS factory. With a little luck, we’ll find a car we can borrow to take us the rest of the way.”

oOoOoOoOo

Donna had just finished cutting out the coupons when the doorbell rang. “I’ll get it,” she told her mum, who’d spent the last twenty minutes making soup and nagging her.

Somehow, she wasn’t surprised when she found the Doctor and Rose on the other side of the door, both looking a little worse for the wear. “You would not believe the day we’re having,” he said.

She looked them up and down, taking in the smudges of dirt on the Doctor’s blue suit and the way Rose’s black leather jacket was unzipped halfway. “Would that be why you both look like you’ve been playing in the dirt?”

They looked at each other, and she watched them take in the details of their appearance. “ATMOS tried to drive us into the river,” Rose said finally.

Donna’s jaw dropped slightly. “But our car has ATMOS,” she said.

The Doctor nodded. “I need to look at it.”

“Yes, of course.” She reached for the keys hanging behind the door, then stepped outside.

“So is there anything I can do?” she asked after unlocking the car for the Doctor. Rose was pacing along the edge of the driveway, her mobile to her ear.

The Doctor was on his knees, looking underneath the car, but he poked his head back out to look at her. “Not really. Thanks though, Donna.”

The soldier who’d driven them earlier shifted his weight from one foot to the other while the Doctor lifted the bonnet of the car. “I’ll requisition us a vehicle.”

“Anything without ATMOS,” the Doctor ordered sharply.

Donna shared a knowing look with the young soldier; that really didn’t need saying.

The Doctor stared at the inner workings of the car. ATMOS was attached to the muffler, but it had to do something else. Right, Martha said those fifty-two people were poisoned, he considered as he nosed around the engine. And the ATMOS unit contains a gas converter, so maybe… maybe it’s also loaded with a poison gas?

He was peripherally aware that a door had opened and shut somewhere, and then he heard a voice asking, “Is it them? Is it them? Is it the Doctor and Rose?” He had no intention of answering, but then he heard, “Ah, it’s you!”

“Who?” he asked, straightening up.

Rose spun around, her phone down as she’d been in the middle of redialing Martha. “Oh, it’s you,” she said, then put the phone to her ear.

Donna looked from her granddad to the Doctor and Rose. “What, have you met before?”

“Yeah, Christmas Eve,” her granddad said. “They disappeared, right in front of me.”
She stared at him. “And you never said?” she demanded indignantly.

“Well, you never said,” he countered reasonably. “Wilf, sir. Wilfred Mott.” The older man’s eyes were wide with excitement. “You must be one of them aliens.”

The Doctor blinked a few times. That wasn’t how he was used to being greeted, even by people who knew. “Yeah, but don’t shout it out.” He grinned and shook the man’s hand. “Nice to meet you properly, Wilf.”

“Oh, an alien hand.” Wilf flexed his fingers and looked a little overwhelmed.

“Martha’s not answering, Doctor,” Rose told him, hitting redial again. “What do you want me to tell her if I finally get through? Just that it’s Sontarans—Code Red Sontarans?”

“Yeah.” He glanced up and down the street; if the numbers he’d seen earlier were any indication, at least half of them were under Sontaran control. “But there’s got to be more to it. They can’t be just remote controlling cars. That’s not enough.” He looked back at Rose while tapping a rhythm against his leg. “Nothing?”

Rose started to shake her head, but then Martha’s phone finally rang, instead of sending her straight to voicemail yet again. “Hold on.” She bit her lip and finally exhaled when the other end picked up.

“What do you need, Rose?”

“Martha.” Rose started pacing again. “We’ve got information for you to pass on to Colonel Mace. Can you do that for us?”

“Of course.”


The Doctor waved for the phone, and she handed it over. “Martha, hi. UNIT should have a file on the Sontarans. Tell Colonel Mace that they’re are inside the factory, so UNIT shouldn’t even start shooting. They’ll get massacred. I’ll get back as soon as I can. You got that?”

He nodded a few times, then ended the call and tossed the phone back to Rose before spinning back around to the car. “Hopefully that will keep everyone safe until we get there,” he muttered as he poked around at the car’s innards with the sonic screwdriver.

“But you tried sonicking it before,” Donna pointed out. “You didn’t find anything.”

“Yeah, but now I know it’s Sontaran. I know what I’m looking for.”

“The thing is, Doctor,” Wilf said, “that Donna is my only grandchild. You got to promise me you’re going to take care of her.”

Rose put her hand on Wilf’s shoulder. “Donna’s actually pretty brilliant at taking care of herself,” she rebuked gently. She understood the desire of a family member to know their loved one was safe when travelling with the Doctor, but she remembered how it had felt when her mum had demanded the Doctor keep her safe, calling her a kid. She’d felt like a kid. That feeling was part of what had driven her to give the Doctor permission to do what needed to be done, regardless of what might happen to her.

And Donna, brash as she seemed at first glance, had almost no self-confidence. If Rose could help her family see how capable she was already…
Wilf blinked a few times, but then he smiled and nodded readily. “Oh, yeah. That’s my Donna—always diving into new things without reading the rule book first and learning on the go. She’s gotten into a few scrapes that way, but she’s always managed to get herself out of them.”

Donna made a soft sound of surprise, and Rose grinned and nodded from her to the Doctor. “They’re an excellent pair, then,” she said. “The Doctor threw the TARDIS manual into a supernova.”

“Yeah, and then I managed to do what it told me I couldn’t do,” he retorted, his voice slightly muffled by the bonnet.

“Whoa!” He jumped back, and Rose peered down at the top side of the ATMOS device. Spikes were protruding out of it now.

“It’s a temporal pocket,” the Doctor explained. “I knew there was something else in there. It’s hidden just a second out of sync with real time.”

“But what’s it hiding?” Donna asked.

Rose caught sight of a fifth person walking their direction, and she groaned when she recognised Donna’s mum. Between their interactions with her and the things Donna had mentioned in the last month, she’d rather hoped they could get away without ever running into her—but that didn’t seem to be.

“I don’t know, men and their cars,” Sylvia said, a smirk on her face as she walks towards them. “Sometimes I think if I was a car.”

Her gaze landed on Rose, and her eyes widened. “Oh, it’s you,” she spat out. Rose wiggled her fingers in a weak wave, and Sylvia turned to look at the car.

“And you! Doctor, what was it?”

“Yeah, that’s me,” the Doctor said, waving without looking up.

Wilf’s eyes widened, and he looked from the Doctor to his daughter and back again. “What, have you met them as well?” he stammered.

Sylvia rolled her eyes. “Dad, it’s the couple from the wedding. When you were laid up with Spanish flu,” she added, answering a question Rose hadn’t gotten around to asking yet. She put her hands on her hips and glared at the Doctor. “I’m warning you, last time these two turned up, it was a disaster.”

Whatever the Doctor had been doing to the ATMOS device obviously triggered something, because gas billowed out of it.

“Get back!” the Doctor ordered. He fiddled with the sonic, adjusting the settings, and then pointed it at the ATMOS device. “That’ll stop it.”

“I told you.” Sylvia gestured wildly at the Doctor, who was waving his hand over the ATMOS device, trying to get the gas to dissipate. “He’s blown up the car! Who is he, anyway? What sort of doctor blows up cars?”

“Oh, not now, Mum,” Donna said impatiently.

Her face set in a disagreeable expression. “Oh, should I make an appointment?” she sniped, before
turning around and stomping off.

The Doctor ignored the woman, focusing on the more imminent disaster. He sniffed at the air and shook his head. “That wasn’t just exhaust fumes. It’s some sort of gas—artificial gas.”

“And it’s aliens, is it?” Wilf asked. “Aliens?”

“But if it’s poisonous…” Donna began.

“Then they’ve got poisonous gas in millions of cars around the world,” Rose concluded. The three of them looked up and down the street, spotting the ATMOS decal in almost every window.

While they were busy looking around, Wilf climbed into the car. “It’s not safe. I’m going to get it off the street.”

As soon as he closed the door, they all heard the ominous snick of the locks activating. Having just been in an ATMOS vehicle that had locked them inside, the Doctor and Rose knew exactly what had happened.

“He’s trapped,” Rose whispered as gas poured out of the exhaust pipe.

Donna darted to the door and yanked on the handle. “Hold on! Turn it off. Granddad, get out of there!”

“I can’t! It’s not locked! It’s them aliens again!” Wilf held up the keys—he hadn’t even started the car before the ATMOS system had started.

“What’s he doing?” Sylvia yelled from the door. “What’s he done?”

Rose watched helplessly while Wilf pounded on the window and the Doctor tried to use the sonic screwdriver to get the car to stop. Then she spun around and started looking for something to break the glass.

“They’ve activated it!” the Doctor yelled back at Sylvia.

The gas filling the street made it difficult to see, but Rose was sure she’d seen a dry rock wall at the front of one of these gardens when they’d walked down the street earlier. She pulled the collar of her shirt up to cover her mouth and nose as she ran, though her eyes were still burning by the time she found what she was looking for.

Rose grabbed three medium sized rocks and ran back to the driveway. The Doctor had moved to the door, trying to unsuccessfully to unlock it while Donna panicked.

“Get back!” Rose shouted, her voice hoarse.

They looked up at her, and she closed the bonnet and held up a rock. “Cover your head, Wilf!” she ordered.

Inside the car, the older man looked at her blankly for a minute, then ducked as close to the door as he could, covering his head with his hands.

Rose tossed one rock up in the air and caught it, before leaning back and putting all her weight into throwing it at the windscreen. The glass gave, but didn’t shatter completely, so she threw a second rock immediately after.

This time, the window shattered. The Doctor clambered on top of the car and dragged Wilf out by
his armpits.

“Well don’t just stand there like idiots!” Sylvia shouted. “Get inside!”

Rose turned in a slow circle and watched as the sky filled with poisonous gas. Whatever the Sontarans’ plan was, it had begun.
A New Strategy

When Wilf took a staggering step towards the house, Rose drew a breath of relief and immediately gagged. The sharp, acrid taste of the poison hit the back of her throat and she covered her mouth and coughed as the Doctor and Donna helped Wilf.

_Hold your breath as much as possible and breathe shallowly when you have to,_ she told herself.

Sylvia charged down the walkway and shoved the Doctor away from Wilf. Shrugging, the Doctor stepped back next to Rose, then nodded to Donna. “Get inside the house,” he directed as they helped Wilf to the door. “Just try and close off the doors and windows.”

“Doctor, Miss Tyler.”

Rose turned and squinted at Ross in a big, black taxi.

The private nodded for them to come over. “This is all I could find that hasn’t got ATMOS.”

The Doctor ran to the car, but Rose looked back at Donna. “Donna, you coming?”

The other woman hesitated, pursed her lips for a moment, but finally nodded. “Yeah.”

“Donna!” Sylvia exclaimed. “Don’t go. Look what happens every time that Doctor appears.” She gestured expansively at the poison gas filling the sky. “Stay with us, please.”

Wilf put his hand on Donna’s shoulder and pushed her towards the car. “You go, my darling.”

The gas was making Rose’s eyes burn, so she ran for the relative protection of the car. “Is she coming?” the Doctor asked as she scooted close to him.

Rose coughed a few times and nodded. _Yeah,_ she said, opting for telepathy since her throat hurt. _But what is it about the mothers that makes them decide to blame you for all the stuff we try to stop? My mum did it, and so did Francine._

The Doctor snorted. _You ask as if it makes any sense to me,_ he pointed out as Donna slid into the car. Ross put the car in gear, and the Doctor leaned forward to look at Donna. “How are you holding up?”

Her eyes were red and watering, but she set her jaw and nodded. “I’ll be all right,” she said.

He eyed her dubiously, but let it go for now. “And you, Rose?” he asked, looking his bond mate over critically.

She smiled at him. “I’ve been practicing holding my breath. I figure the fewer breaths I take, the less the gas will affect me.”

After that, the drive back to the ATMOS factory was tense and silent. Ross dropped them off out front by the mobile HQ unit, and the Doctor bent down to look him in the eye. “Ross, look after yourself. Get inside the building.”

He nodded. “Will do.”

After he drove away, Donna looked up at them, gagging a little. “The air is disgusting.”
“It’s not so bad for us,” the Doctor told her sympathetically. “Go on, get inside the TARDIS.”

“She needs a key, Doctor,” Rose pointed out.

“Quite right, Rose.” He reached into his breast pocket and pulled one out, handing it to Donna. “Keep that. Go on, that’s yours. Quite a big moment really,” he added with a grin.

“Yeah.” Donna coughed. “Maybe we can get sentimental after the world’s finished choking to death.”

“Good idea.” The Doctor and Rose jogged towards the entrance to the factory, ducking under the security gate over the driveway.

“Where are you going?” Donna asked.

They turned and jogged backwards a few steps. “To stop a war,” the Doctor called out.

Rose took the Doctor’s hand as they ran into the ATMOS factory. You didn’t suggest I go to the TARDIS with Donna, she observed.

He shot her a sidelong glance. Would you have gone, if I had?

She shook her head. Of course not. I’m staying with you. The air is awful, but UNIT will have gas masks.

Thought so. Figured it would just be a waste of time. But promise you’ll tell me if the gas gets to be too much for you.

Rose brushed her thumb over his knuckles. I promise. They pushed open the door to the mobile HQ, and she slowed down and raised her eyebrow when he looked down at her. Remember to be courteous to Colonel Mace.

He sighed, but she saw a smile on his face.

Colonel Mace turned to the door when they walked into the command room. The Doctor nodded briskly at the man, noting the hard set of his jaw.

“Colonel Mace, do you trust me?”

The military man blinked, and the severity of his expression softened. “I trust your record, Doctor, and Sir Alistair’s high opinion of you.”

“Thank you. Then do not engage the Sontarans in battle. There is nothing they like better than a war.” He looked at the map, which displayed a live map of all the ATMOS devices worldwide. “Just leave this to me.”

“And what are you going to do?” the colonel pressed.

The Doctor took a deep breath. Something was off in the room. Something smelled… smelled like a clone. He glanced at Martha—Martha who hadn’t answered her phone this afternoon for several long minutes.

“I’ve got the TARDIS,” he said nonchalantly, baiting a trap for the spy who might be in their midst. If he was wrong, nothing would happen. If he was right and they took the TARDIS, he’d soon have a spy of his own onboard the Sontaran vessel. “I’m going to get on board their ship.”
Rose smiled at him, but a moment later, her eyes widened and then hardened, a glint of gold present in her whiskey brown irises. The Doctor shook his head quickly, and she pressed her lips into a thin line.

He dashed to Martha’s side, barely able to withstand his gag reflex. She was definitely the clone. Beside the smell, he also noticed the distinctive hair pattern and the way her pupils didn’t react quite right to the light. “Come on,” he whispered, and she smiled and ran after him and Rose, just like old times.

But it wasn’t like old times. Rose, Martha is a clone, he told her. Don’t do anything to give away that we know. If she thinks she’s fooled us, we have a triple agent.

She helped the Sontarans steal our TARDIS, Rose deducted.

Yes, and she’s going to help get it back.

Outside, the gaseous emissions from the ATMOS devices were rapidly creating a repeat of the Big Smoke, the smog event of 1952 which had killed as many as twelve thousand people. The Doctor engaged his respiratory bypass as they ran through the haze to the alley where the TARDIS had been only a few minutes before.

As he’d suspected, it was empty. Not-Martha did an impressive job of standing at the entrance to the alley, looking confused.

“But… where’s the TARDIS?”

The Doctor circled his finger in the air. “Taste that, in the air.” He stuck his tongue out and made a face when the nasty taste hit his advanced tastebuds. “That sort of metal tang. Teleport exchange. It’s the Sontarans. They’ve taken it. I’m stuck on Earth like, like an ordinary person.” A large cloud of gas billowed around him as he rambled. “Like a human. How rubbish is that? Sorry, no offence, but come on.”

Rose stood by Not-Martha, watching the Doctor’s performance. It was hard not to lash out at the clone for impersonating her friend—especially when she knew that if the real Martha could see the Doctor now, she’d know something was wrong.

“So what do we do?” Not-Martha asked.

“Well…”

Not-Martha was looking at where the TARDIS had stood, so the Doctor shot her a calculating glance.

Rose looked at him, then put a hand on Not-Martha’s shoulder. “Have you phoned your family, Martha?”

Not-Martha shrugged her hand off and glared at Rose. “No,” she snapped, and that one word eliminated any doubt that this was not Martha. She looked from Rose to the Doctor. “What for?”

“The gas,” the Doctor pointed out evenly. “Tell them to stay inside.”

Not-Martha smiled suddenly and rolled her eyes, like she’d just misunderstood what they were saying. “Course I will, yeah but, what about Donna? I mean, where’s she?”

“Oh, she’s gone home,” the Doctor lied as fumes billowed around him. “She’s not like you. She’s
not a soldier.’"

Not-Martha straightened slightly with pride, and the Doctor and Rose both pressed their lips together to keep from snapping at her. The real Martha wouldn’t accept that title from them.

But they didn’t have time to stand around here. “Right. So. Avanti,” the Doctor said and led them back to HQ.

He pushed the doors open and tossed his coat off to the side. “Change of plan,” he announced. “No TARDIS, so I’ll have to work from here. You don’t mind, do you, Colonel Mace?”

The colonel straightened and clasped his hands behind his back. “Not if you have a plan to save the planet, Doctor.”

The Doctor grinned at him. “Oh, I always have a plan to save the Earth. That’s pretty much my primary job description.”

“Has anyone figured out what the gas is yet?” Rose asked. The live, interactive map onscreen was terrifying.

“We’re working on it,” Not-Martha told her.

A UNIT officer spoke up from her computer station. “It’s harmful, but not lethal until it reaches eighty percent density. We’re having the first reports of deaths from the centre of Tokyo City.”

“And who are you?” the Doctor asked.

She stood up quickly and snapped a salute. “Captain Marion Price, sir.”

The Doctor sighed. “Oh, put your hand down. Don’t salute.” He walked away from her to adjust the communications controls at the main ops desk.

*Preparing to call the Sontarans,* Rose realised as she watched him work.

Rose watched Colonel Mace anxiously. So far, he’d been friendlier than she’d expected of a military higher-up, but the more tense the situation became, the more pushback she expected from him.

“Jodrell Bank’s traced a signal, Doctor,” Colonel Mace said, referring to the observatory in Manchester. “coming from five thousand miles above the Earth. We’re guessing that’s what triggered the cars.”

The Doctor stopped and looked at the new display being projected onscreen. “The Sontaran ship.”

“NATO has gone to Defcon One,” Colonel Mace told them. “We’re preparing a strike.”

“You can’t do that,” the Doctor insisted, and for once, Rose wasn’t inclined to encourage him to speak more delicately. “Nuclear missiles won’t even scratch the surface. Let me talk to the Sontarans.”

Colonel Mace’s eyes widened when he realised what the Doctor had been doing for the last ninety seconds. “You’re not authorised to speak on behalf of the Earth.”

The muscle in the Doctor’s jaw twitched, and Rose put her hand on his shoulder. “Colonel Mace, the Doctor is the only person on this planet who has the knowledge and experience necessary to bring us through this safely.”
His gaze flicked from her to the Doctor, and he nodded once.

“Thank you,” the Doctor said and stuck his sonic screwdriver into the communications system. “Calling the Sontaran Command Ship under Jurisdiction Two of the Intergalactic Rules of Engagement. This is the Doctor.”

The satellite image of the Earth was replaced with a video relay of the Sontaran ship. “Doctor, breathing your last?” General Staal asked smugly.

“My God.” Colonel Mace recoiled. “They’re like trolls.”

The Doctor rolled his eyes and started pacing. “Yeah, loving the diplomacy, thanks,” he muttered to the colonel. Then he raised his voice again to speak to the Sontarans. “So, tell me, General Staal,” he drawled as he sat down at a computer station. “Since when did you lot become cowards?”

General Staal’s face scrunched up in anger and he strode towards them. “How dare you!”

“Oh, that’s diplomacy?” Colonel Mace asked sarcastically.

But Rose had seen the Doctor use this tactic earlier, and she leaned close to explain it to him. “It’s the one insult they can’t stand,” she whispered. “Call them cowards, and they’ll give away all their plans.”

Staal was glaring at the Doctor from five thousand miles away. “Doctor, you impugn my honour.”

The Doctor leaned back in his chair and swung his feet up onto the table. “Yeah, I’m really glad you didn’t say belittle, because then I’d have a field day. But poison gas? That’s the weapon of a coward and you know it. Staal, you could blast this planet out of the sky, and yet you’re sitting up above watching it die. Where’s the fight in that? Where’s the honour? Or,” he suggested, striking out with his best guess, “are you lot planning something else? This isn’t normal Sontaran warfare. What are you lot up to?”

Staal and his second-in-command both straightened to their full height. “A general would be unwise to reveal his strategy to the opposing forces.”

A grin spread across the Doctor’s face. “Ah, the war’s not going so well, then. Losing, are we?”

Staal scowled. “Such a suggestion is impossible.”

“What war?” Colonel Mace asked.

The Doctor turned slightly towards him and answered the question without taking his eyes off the Sontaran leader. It was vital to maintain eye contact when talking to a Sontaran—looking away was seen as a sign of weakness.

“The war between the Sontarans and the Rutans,” he explained. “It’s been raging, far out in the stars, for fifty thousand years. Fifty thousand years of bloodshed, and for what?”


The Doctor rolled his eyes and reached into his pocket for the sonic screwdriver. “Give me a break,” he muttered, and pointed the sonic at the screen to replace the image of the Sontarans with a cartoon.

Colonel Mace shifted his weight uncomfortably from one foot to the other. “Doctor, are you quite
sure this is the best way to handle this interaction? You seem to be doing nothing but antagonising them.”

“I’m sure,” the Doctor said, his voice curt. He changed the channel back to the open comms link with the Sontaran ship. “Finished?” he asked General Staal.

Staal started walking, and the Doctor leaned forward, wondering what he was doing. “You will not be so quick to ridicule when you’ll see our prize.” He pointed at the TARDIS. “Behold. We are the first Sontarans in history to capture a TARDIS.”

The Doctor’s hearts raced, but he kept his face as blank as possible to hide his excitement. If the TARDIS was in the same room as the comms link, then she should have patched into the conversation and been broadcasting it for Donna to watch. And that meant he could get a message to her.

His mind spun, trying to think of a secret code that she would understand. “Well,” he started quietly, “as prizes go, that’s noble. As they say in Latin, Donna nobis pacem.” He let the words linger in the air for a moment, hoping she knew he was talking to her. Then he got to the actual message. “But did you never wonder about its design? It’s a phone box. It contains a phone. A telephonic device for communication. Sort of symbolic. Like, if only we could communicate, you and I.” He pointed from himself to the camera, knowing that to Donna, it would look like he was pointing directly at her.

“All you have communicated is your distress, Doctor.”

The Doctor ignored Staal, pointing at the camera again, hoping Donna would understand his message. Since she and Rose had exchanged numbers, Donna could be their secret weapon, working from inside the Sontaran ship to take them down.

He took a deep breath and looked back at Staal. “Big mistake though, showing it to me.” He waggled the sonic screwdriver tauntingly. “Because I’ve got remote control.”

You know, we really should, Rose said, just as Staal ordered the transmission to be closed.

“Ah, well.” The Doctor jumped to his feet, feeling more hopeful than he had since he’d realised Sontarans were behind ATMOS.

Colonel Mace looked at the blank screen and back at the Doctor. “Doctor, would you mind telling me exactly what that accomplished?”

The Doctor pressed his tongue to the back of his teeth and pretended to consider. He had no objection to letting the military man know what his plan was—at least in part—but he couldn’t let Not-Martha overhear.

“I would,” he said finally, “but it’s classified Omega Scarlett,” he said, giving the highest level of UNIT clearance. No matter how fast Martha had advanced through the ranks, there was no way her clearance was that high.

Colonel Mace’s eyes widened. “Very well, Doctor. There’s an office here where we can speak privately.” He nodded at Rose. “The files are clear, ma’am, that you are to receive every courtesy and security clearance the Doctor receives. You’re welcome to join us if you’d like.”

Rose looked up at the Doctor, and he nodded. The three of them hustled to the small office, where the Doctor immediately turned on the sonic screwdriver and waved it at the walls, soundproofing them.
Colonel Mace sat down behind the desk and pointed at the two chairs. “Sit down,” he invited. “And then perhaps you could tell me what exactly is going on.”

Rose sat, but the Doctor paced the length of the office. “You can’t beat the Sontarans by going against them head-to-head. They’re too advanced.”

The colonel sighed and shook his head. “You don’t give us enough credit, Doctor. We have more resources than you are aware of.”

“Come on, Colonel,” Rose exclaimed, finally losing a little bit of her patience. “You heard the Doctor. The Sontarans have been at war with the Rutans for fifty thousand years. Do you really think they haven’t perfected the art of warfare by now? The chances that you’ve salvaged something from Torchwood that could beat them are slim to none—because that’s what you meant when you referred to resources we don’t know Earth has, wasn’t it?”

The colonel’s jaw dropped a little, and the Doctor rested his hand on Rose’s shoulder. “Thank you, Rose.” He looked at the military man. “I understand you want to believe in your own military superiority,” he said, “but you have got to trust me. You cannot beat the Sontarans in head-to-head combat.”

Colonel Mace pursed his lips into a thin line and finally nodded. “Very well. What is your alternative suggestion, then?”

The Doctor grinned and bounced on his toes. “Infiltration! Because as it turns out, I already have a spy onboard their ship.”

“And just how did you manage that?”

He tugged on his ear. “Bit of an accident, really,” he admitted. “We sent our friend to the TARDIS so she wouldn’t choke on the gas, and then the Sontarans locked onto it and transported it to their ship.”

“So that’s why the Sontarans have the TARDIS,” Colonel Mace said. He straightened up a moment later. “And everything you said about connecting via phone…”

The Doctor nodded. “Donna has Rose’s mobile number. She’s our man on the inside, Colonel Mace. Well, woman on the inside.”

The colonel looked at the Doctor for another long moment and finally nodded. “Very well, Doctor. I will trust your strategy for now.”

“Thank you, Colonel.” The Doctor turned to leave, but one more thought occurred to him. “Do you still have men inside the factory?”

Mace’s brow furrowed. “Of course we do. Why?”

The Doctor shook his head and shoved his hands into his pockets. “I’m almost positive the Sontarans have a teleport pod somewhere in the factory. They can bring soldiers in without us even knowing.”

The Colonel’s face hardened. “Then we’ll be ready for them.”

His stubborn dependence on firepower elicited the first glimmer of real anger from the Doctor. “Get your men out of there,” he growled.

Colonel Mace paused and looked up at him. “Why would I do that, Doctor?”
The Doctor took a deep breath and raked his hand through his hair. “I told you: Sontarans are a warrior race,” he said, speaking rapidly. “Clone bred so that every one of them is a perfect soldier. They have superior armour and superior weaponry. There is no way your men can beat them.” He looked at the colonel, letting his gaze bore into the man. “Tell them to fall back.”

“But what if the Sontarans advance on us here?” Mace countered.

The Doctor pressed his tongue to the back of his teeth and stared at the ceiling. It was a fair question, and a likely possibility. How could they keep the Sontarans from attacking without sacrificing their men?

The saying might go, “The best defence is a good offence,” but the Doctor had always preferred defence. He grinned when he hit on the answer and bounced on his toes. “Use mines to create a perimeter around the factory.”

The Colonel blinked, and the Doctor rolled his eyes.

“You don’t need to confront them yourself,” he explained as he launched into his plan. “All you need to do is contain them—keep them from attacking you. So use the mines so they have no way out.” He shrugged. “They’ll probably teleport back to their ship, but at least they won’t kill all of your men.”

He stared at the colonel. “Please, Colonel Mace, I’m begging you. Don’t sacrifice those men because you can’t see past your military training to find another way. We will save the Earth. I promise. But we’ll have to outsmart them, because we can’t outgun them.”

Colonel Mace didn’t look at all certain, but he finally nodded and picked up his walkie talkie. “Trap One to all stations. Retreat. Order imperative. Immediate retreat.”

Donna Noble was having a hell of a day. After watching her grandfather nearly choke to death inside his death trap of a car, she’d been eager to go back to the ATMOS factory with the Doctor and Rose. She wanted to do something to help stop this. But instead, the gas had been too much for her lungs, and she’d been sent to the TARDIS, like she was back in school and it was the school nurse’s office.

She’d felt a light bump only a few minutes later, like the TARDIS had landed—but she knew the ship hadn’t actually flown anywhere. So she’d cautiously opened the door and peeked out, and caught a glimpse of several aliens from the back.

Not even she was brash enough to step out there and challenge them on her own, so she’d closed the door carefully.

She’d been pacing the console room ever since, trying to figure out what to do. When the Doctor had looked directly at her a moment ago, she’d known he had a message for her. Donna nobis pacem, he’d said—that had to be her.

“Like, if only we could communicate, you and I.”

The TARDIS rocked, and Donna grabbed onto the console. The Sontarans must be moving it, scared of the Doctor’s comments about having a remote.

Donna pulled her mobile out of her pocket again and stared at it. “But what do I do?” she wailed helplessly. She’d tried to dial Rose as soon as the Doctor’s transmission had cut off, but Rose had yet
to pick up.

She bit her lip and looked at her contacts. She really wanted to talk to her granddad, but she knew that if she called the house, it was likely to be her mother who answered. Finally, not seeing any way around it, she sighed and called home. The phone rang twice, then her familiar voice said, “Donna. Where are you, sweetheart?”

Donna swallowed back tears. “Mum, you all right?”

In the background, she heard her granddad ask, “Is that her?”

“Oh, just finish the job,” Sylvia chided.

Donna rolled her eyes. Even at the end of the world, her mum had to have a go at someone.

“Your granddad’s sealing us in,” she explained a moment later. “He’s sealing the windows. Our own house, and we’re sealed in.”

She sounded scared, Donna realised. Even with everything that had happened in the last year—the disastrous wedding reception, her dad getting sick and dying—her mum had never been scared. Or maybe she was, and she just hid it by being angry.

Her mum was still talking though. “All those things they said about pollution and ozone and carbon, they’re really happening aren’t they?”

“There’s people working on it, Mum,” Donna assured her. For once, she was in the position to make her mum feel better. “They’re going to fix it, I promise.”

“Oh, like you’d know. You’re so clever.”

Donna flinched. The words were no different than what she’d heard from her mother her whole life, but after a month on the TARDIS with the Doctor and Rose, actually being praised when she thought of something, they stung more than they had in the past.

“Oh, don’t start. Please don’t.”

“I’m sorry,” her mum whispered, and Donna could tell she was almost crying. “I wish you were here.”

Donna was quiet for a moment, wondering what to say to that, then she heard her granddad’s voice as he took the phone.

“Now, come on, Sylvia,” he said. “Look, that doesn’t help. Donna, where are you?”

Donna’s heart started racing when she heard his voice, and she took a calming breath before she spoke. He didn’t need to know how scared she was.

She glanced around the TARDIS. In a way, that’s where she was, but she was also… She shrugged. “It’s sort of hard to say. You all right?”

“Yes.” His voice was bracing, full of reassurance. “Fighting fit, yeah. Are they with you, the Doctor and Rose?”

“Oh, those two,” her mum grumbled in the background.

Donna shook her head. “No. I’m all on my own.”
“Look, you promised you were safe with them.”

“I am, Gramps.” Donna clenched her hand around her phone. “There’s something they need me to do. I just don’t know what.”

“Well, I mean, the whole place is covered. The whole of London, they’re saying. The whole, the whole world. It’s the scale of it, Donna. I mean, how can one couple stop all that?”

Donna thought of all the things she’d seen the Doctor and Rose do, and her fear receded. How many alien invasions had they already averted? “Trust me. They can do it.”

“Yeah, well, if they don’t, you tell them they’ll have to answer to me.”

Donna smiled. His protective attitude was comforting in its familiarity. “I will. Just as soon as I see them, I’ll tell them.”

On the other end of the line, her granddad huffed slightly, then hung the phone up. Donna realised he was more upset than she’d caught before. He didn’t want her to hear him cry, but that only made her more determined to get out of this and make it back home.

And as soon as she saw the Doctor and Rose, she’d let them know what she thought of them telling her to call and then not answering the bloody phone.

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Rose looked at her phone, then dropped it back into her pocket before Not-Martha could see. *Ten missed calls from Donna,* she told the Doctor.

He tugged on his ear. *I know. But I can’t talk to her until I figure out more of the Sontarans’ strategy.* He grimaced. *We’ll just have to make it up to her later.*

They shared an amused look. Donna would not be pleased that they’d ignored all her calls.

They found Not-Martha in the main command centre, holding a clipboard. The Doctor snatched it out of her hands, and while Rose would normally chastise him for being rude, she didn’t really care if he was rude to the clone with her friend’s face. He smirked slightly as he read, having caught that thought.

Not-Martha scowled at him, but didn’t argue. Instead, she rattled off the contents of the report he’d taken from her. “There’s carbon monoxide, hydrocarbons, nitrogen oxides, but ten percent unidentified. Some sort of artificial heavy element we can’t trace. You ever seen anything like it?”

Behind her back, Rose rolled her eyes. That was a leading question if she’d ever heard one.

“It must be something the Sontarans invented,” the Doctor mused. “This isn’t just poison. They need this gas for something else. What could that be?”

“Launch grid online and active,” Captain Price said.

Rose spun around and looked at the huge monitors, now displaying the global nuclear launch grid. She looked from the monitors to the Doctor, who was staring at the computers in wide-eyed horror.

“Positions, ladies and gentlemen,” Colonel Mace ordered. “Defcon One initiatives in progress.”

The Doctor shook his head and stalked over to the colonel. “You said you trusted my strategy,” he protested.
“And I did, Doctor,” he said, a hint of apology in his voice. “But the gas is at sixty percent density. Eighty percent and people start dying, Doctor.” He clasped his hands behind his back. “We’ve got no choice.”

The Doctor raked his hands through his hair as the countdown began. None of Earth’s weapons would even scratch the surface of the Sontarans’ ship, but this would be seen as an act of war regardless of its success, and that gave the Sontarans the right to attack.


“You’re making a mistake, Colonel,” the Doctor said quietly, unable to hide his disappointment entirely. “For once, I hope the Sontarans are ahead of you.”

Rose rested her hand on his back. Well, they do have a spy, she pointed out reasonably.

The Doctor blinked, and his gaze flicked over to Not-Martha, who was watching the countdown on the screen avidly. True. They obviously want this planet for something, so maybe they cloned someone with high enough clearance to halt the launch.

Captain Price rattled off country names as their nuclear launch codes came online. “North America, online. United Kingdom, online. France, online. India, online. Pakistan, online. China, online. North Korea, online. All systems locked and coordinated. Launching in ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five—”

“God save us,” Colonel Mace whispered.

—“Four, three, two, one.”

Out of the corner of his eye, the Doctor saw Not-Martha tap at her phone. He held his breath and stared at the monitor, hoping with all he had that Rose’s guess was right.

“Zero.”

The screen stayed at zero for just a second, then it went completely dark.

“What is it?” Colonel Mace asked. “What happened? Did we launch? Well, did we?”

The Doctor stared at the screen, then looked over at Not-Martha. The smirk on her face confirmed Rose’s suggestion, and he breathed a sigh of relief.

“Negative, sir,” Captain Price said, working frantically at her computer. “The launch codes have been wiped, sir. It must be the Sontarans.”

The Doctor let out a long, slow breath, then he and Rose casually walked over to Not-Martha while the two military officers tried to sort out what had happened.

“Can we override it?” Colonel Mace asked.

Captain Price worked frantically with her computer station. “Trying it now, sir.”

As glad as the Doctor was that the launch kept getting cancelled, it was yet another mystery. “Missiles wouldn’t even dent that ship, so why are the Sontarans so keen to stop you?” He looked down at Not-Martha. “Any ideas?”

“How should I know?” she retorted.
A series of explosions rocked the trailer. The Doctor and Colonel Mace exchanged a glance; the Sontarans had attempted to cross the perimeter.

Not-Martha looked up, her eyes wide. “What was that?”

“That,” the Doctor said with some satisfaction, “was the safety measures we took against a possible Sontaran invasion of the factory.”

She stared at him, her eyes hard. “You mined the exits.”

“Yep.” He grinned at her. “Pretty clever, don’t you think? They can get in, but they can’t get out.”

Her hand clenched on her mobile, and he realised she was torn between a desire to warn her superiors about their surprise tactic, and the need to stay alert and ready to cancel yet another launch attempt.

“They’ve taken the factory,” Colonel Mace said, “but they can’t get out of the building. Your plan is working so far, Doctor.”

“No need to sound so surprised!” the Doctor complained. He scratched at his sideburn. “But why? They don’t need it. Why attack now? What are they up to?”

“Launch grid back online,” Captain Price announced as the screen flickered to life. A moment later, it went blank again, and the captain tried to track the interference. “They’re inside the system, sir. It’s coming from within UNIT itself.”

“Trace it,” Colonel Mace ordered. “Find out where it’s coming from, and quickly. Gas levels?”

“Sixty-six percent in major population areas, and rising.”
“Sixty-six percent in major population areas, and rising.”

A muscle pulsed in Colonel Mace’s jaw. “Doctor, Miss Tyler, with me please.”

Rose and the Doctor shared a look, then followed the colonel back into his office.

Colonel Mace leaned back in his chair, his hands spread out in front of him. “You were right, Doctor. The Sontarans did try to take over the factory. But something has just occurred to me. If they’ve had this teleport equipment in the building the whole time, and if their battle prowess is as advanced as you claim, they could have stopped us this morning before we took over the factory. They waited until we were inside. Why?”

The answer was painfully obvious to the Doctor and Rose, but they couldn’t let Colonel Mace know about Not-Martha. She was the only thing keeping the planet from getting blown apart.

The Doctor leaned forward. “Because they wanted UNIT here. You gave them something they needed. Something now hidden inside the factory. Something precious.” *Something like the real Martha.*

The man frowned, then his expression cleared. “The mole. The person who’s been cancelling the missile launch every time.”

The Doctor nodded. “Exactly. And I think that means it’s time for us to make use of our own mole. Would you mind if we called Donna from here?”

Colonel Mace stood up. “Not at all. I’ll go see if Captain Price has had any luck tracing the cancellation signal.”

Rose’s phone was in the Doctor’s hand before the door shut behind Colonel Mace. “Will you keep an eye on our favourite clone, Rose?” he asked as he scrolled through her address book, looking for Donna’s number. “Let me know if she’s coming this way, or if she looks overly suspicious I suppose.”

Rose turned her chair so she could see Not-Martha through the glass door, and the Doctor found Donna’s name and dialled.

Donna picked up after the first ring. “What’s happened? Where are you?” she asked, her voice rapid with fear.

“Still on Earth,” he told her, keeping his voice low and even to calm her down. “But don’t worry, we’ve got our secret weapon.”

“What’s that?”

He leaned back in the chair. “You.”

“Oh.” Donna grunted softly, and he could picture the scowl on her face. “Somehow that’s not making me happy. Can’t you just zap us down to Earth with that remote thing?”
The Doctor rubbed at the back of his neck; he hadn’t considered she might believe that little white lie. “Yeah, I haven’t got a remote, though I really should.” He jumped up and started pacing the office. “I need you on that ship. That’s why I made them move the TARDIS. I’m sorry. But you’ve got to go outside.”

“But there’s Sontarans out there,” she protested.

“Sontarans,” he corrected. “But they’ll all be on battle stations right now.” He shot a quick glance at Rose, then leaned against the wall when she nodded. “They don’t exactly walk about having coffee. I can talk you through it.”

“But what if they find me?”

It was the obvious question, and he didn’t have an answer. Because he couldn’t promise that they wouldn’t. There was a chance—a bigger chance than he liked—that she would be caught.

He squeezed his eyes shut and nodded. “I know, and I wouldn’t ask, but there’s nothing else I can do. The whole planet is choking, Donna.”

There was a long pause, then he could hear her take a deep breath. “What do you need me to do?”

Rose was looking at the Doctor anxiously, and he nodded and gave her a small smile. Once again, their companions were proving why they got invited along in the first place.

“The Sontarans are inside the factory, which means they’ve got a teleport link with the ship, but they’ll have deadlocked it. I need you to reopen the link.”

“But I can’t even mend a fuse.”

The Doctor sighed and tilted his head back. “Donna, stop talking about yourself like that,” he said bluntly. “You can do this. I promise.”

Donna swallowed hard and looked around at the relatively safe TARDIS console room. She wasn’t at all certain she could do whatever the Doctor needed from her, but his confidence gave her the courage to try. She’d been walking around the console to the door, and now she lowered the phone and slowly opened the door, just enough to peek out.

The short, armoured body of a Sontaran greeted her, and she carefully closed the door. “There’s a Sontaran,” she informed the Doctor, then corrected herself before he could. “Sontaran.”

“Did he see you?” the Doctor asked, and she could hear the fear in his voice.

She shook her head. “No, he’s got his back to me.”

The Doctor whispered, like he was afraid the Sontaran could hear him over the phone. “Right, Donna, listen. On the back of his neck, on his collar there’s a sort of plug, like a hole. The probic vent. One blow to the probic vent knocks ‘em out.”

Donna realised what he was asking, and she couldn’t help but voice the obvious objection. “But he’s going to kill me.”

“I’m sorry,” the Doctor said, and the genuine distress in his voice made her wish she hadn’t pointed out that possibility. “I swear I’m so sorry, but you’ve got to try.”

Panic warred with determination. This was obviously the only plan the Doctor had. If she didn’t
manage to get that teleport working, the Earth would choke. Her mum and granddad, everyone she knew—they would all die.

Donna took a deep breath and walked up the ramp to the console. The mallet the Doctor liked to use for what Rose called “percussive maintenance” hung from a small hook. She took it in hand and slunk back over to the door.

The Sontaran didn’t move when she slipped out of the TARDIS. As she crept up on him, she saw the spot the Doctor was talking about—a small circle inside of a larger circle, right on the back of his neck.

As silently as she could, she raised the mallet and brought it down hard on the pro—on the vent thingy. To her surprise and absolute delight, the four-foot killing machine went down like a sack of potatoes.

Donna did a little dance and brought the phone back up to her mouth. “Back of the neck,” she cheered quietly.

“Oh, well done!” the Doctor breathed. “Now then, you have to find the external junction feed to the teleport.”

Donna’s heart raced as she crept through the Sontaran ship. Taking down one soldier with his back to her was one thing; risking running into more was quite another.

“What, what’s it look like?” Her eyes darted back and forth, taking in every detail of the dark grey corridor, alert to anything that might indicate another Sontaran was coming.

“A circular panel on the wall,” the Doctor replied. “Big symbol on the front, like a, like a letter T with a horizontal line through it. Or, or, two Fs back to back.”

Donna frowned, trying to picture that. As it turned out, it didn’t matter yet. “Oh. Well, there’s a door,” she told the Doctor when she turned the corner.

“Should be a switch by the side.”

She nodded, even though he couldn’t see her. “Yeah there is. But it’s Sontaran shaped; you need three fingers.”

“You’ve got three fingers.”

“Oh, yeah.” With the adrenaline rushing through her, she didn’t even mind his slightly condescending tone of voice. She just adjusted her fingers to the shape of the switch and pressed, holding her breath that the room on the other side would be empty.

The door slid open, and there was no one in sight. “I’m through.”

“Oh, you are brilliant, you are.”

Donna rolled her eyes at the Doctor’s cooing. “Shut up,” she snapped, even though she glowed with pleasure at the praise. “Right. T with a line through it.”

She waited for the next direction, but instead, the Doctor suddenly said, “Got to go. Keep the line open,” and ended the call.

Donna looked at the phone in her hand. “Keep the line open,” she hissed. “Who am I going to be
taking calls from?” She looked back the way she’d come, but without a guarantee that it would be any safer than what lay ahead, she took a deep breath and kept going.

There was another door a few yards away, and she approached it cautiously. She still hadn’t found that T with a line through it—if she could find that before the Doctor called back, hopefully he’d get her out of here finally.

She was almost at the door when it slid open, and Donna just barely had time to spin and hide behind the bulky door frame. Two lines of Sontarans marched through, and she kept waiting for one of them to spot her. They were soldiers, though, focused on their mission and not any details that might be out of place.

Still. As she watched them march past, she added this to the list of things she would yell at the Doctor for when she saw him again.

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The Doctor pressed the end call button and slid the phone into his pocket. Rose had just told him Colonel Mace was back and marching around the room purposely, and frankly, he wasn’t sure he trusted the man not to have come up with yet another plan that would lead to UNIT deaths.

“Doctor,” the colonel said when they stepped out of the office. “Your plan to keep Sontarans inside the warehouse alone has worked, but there’s been a difficulty we didn’t consider.”

“What do you mean?” the Doctor argued. “Everyone’s out and alive.” As soon as he said it, the problem was obvious. “Everyone’s out. They’re all standing around outside, and you don’t have enough gas masks to go around, because why would you? You didn’t expect this kind of situation when you left headquarters today.”


The Doctor grabbed his coat and had just gotten one arm into the sleeve when Not-Martha came around the corner and glared at him and Rose.

“You’re not going without me.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” he said breezily as he finished putting his coat on. “Would we, Rose?”

“Definitely not,” she agreed.

Rose pulled her gas mask on and grinned up at the Doctor. “Hey Doctor.”

“Are you my mummy?” they said in unison, then broke into giggles.

Not-Martha looked at them in absolute disgust. Which really, if they hadn’t already known she wasn’t Martha, that would have been a big indicator right there. Because after travelling with them for a year, Martha knew their quirky sense of humour.

“Yeah,” she said harshly, “I think Colonel Mace is waiting for us outside, if you’re done messing about.”

The Doctor raised an eyebrow and gestured for her to go first. Then he took Rose’s hand and they followed the clone outside.
What do you think the colonel is going to do? Rose asked.

The Doctor shook his head. *Not a clue. I have an idea personally—the terraform device at Rattigan Academy. But a) that won’t do any good until we stop the source of the gas, and b) I doubt UNIT knows he’s got one of those.*

Colonel Mace was pacing impatiently when they reached him, and the Doctor couldn’t resist needling him a bit. “Reporting as ordered, sir!” he said, snapping a sloppy salute.

The colonel rolled his eyes. “If you could concentrate.” He whipped off his own gas mask and replaced it with a cap matching his khaki uniform. “Attention, all troops. The Sontarans might think of us as primitive, as does every passing species with an axe to grind. They think we’re an easy target for their poison gas, but we will not just sit here and choke to death. We have more technology available to us than they realise, and we will use what we have to give us enough time to fight back against the warriors of Sontar.” He tilted his head to speak into the radio clipped to his shoulder. “Trap One to Hawk Major. Go, go, go.”

A massive downdraft caught the Doctor by surprise and nearly knocked him down. He felt Rose grab onto his arm to hold herself upright, but he couldn’t tear his gaze away from the rapidly clearing skies. There was something up there, but he couldn’t quite make out yet what it was.

“It’s working.” Colonel Mace said into his radio. “The area’s clearing. Engines to maximum.”

The breeze strengthened, and he and Rose braced against each other to stay upright. The shape in the sky was recognisable now.

“It’s the *Valiant,*” Rose shouted over the engines.

“UNIT Carrier Ship *Valiant* reporting for duty,” Colonel Mace said proudly. “With engines strong enough to clear away the fog.”

The Doctor took his gas mask off and laughed as he ran his hand through his hair. He had to admit he never would have thought to use the *Valiant* like that. “Whoa, that’s brilliant.”

Colonel Mace rocked back on his heels. “Thank you, Doctor.” A furrow appeared between his eyebrows. “Of course, that only helps the greater London area, but just like you are instructed in a plane crash to put on your own oxygen masks before helping anyone else…”

The Doctor nodded. “Best if we can keep breathing for a little bit longer here. That way, we have time to save the entire planet. I’m truly impressed, Colonel,” he said sincerely.

Colonel Mace stood a little straighter, a proud smile on his face. “And your plan, Doctor? Is it—?

“Going exactly as expected,” the Doctor said quickly, before Colonel Mace could give Donna’s location away to Not-Martha. “In fact, I think it’s time to initiate the next phase.” He raised his eyebrows at the clone and bounced lightly on his toes. “What do you say, Martha Jones? One more run with Rose and me, for old times’ sake?”

She glanced at the colonel, and he nodded sharply. “Permission granted, Dr. Jones. You have my permission to follow any orders the Doctor gives—or whatever he likes to call his directives—that seem necessary for the salvation of this planet.”

Not-Martha nodded and snapped a salute, then grinned at the Doctor. “Ready whenever you are.”

The Doctor started to return her smile, then pretended to remember something. “I left my sonic
screwdriver on Colonel Mace’s desk,” he lied. “Rose, why don’t you and Martha get into the building? I’ll catch you up. And be careful of the mines!” he ordered as he jogged towards the trailer.

As soon as he was out of Not-Martha’s sight, he pulled Rose’s phone out of his pocket and hit redial. “Donna, hold on. I’m coming,” he assured her, then he ended the call and dropped the phone back in his pocket.

He caught back up with Rose and the clone just inside the building, at the top of a flight of stairs. “All right, let’s see if we can solve this poison gas problem, once and for all,” the Doctor said. He scanned the building with the sonic screwdriver, winking at Rose as he did. “Scanning for alien tech, just like you always wanted, love.”

She grinned at him, her tongue peeking out. “Finally, some Spock,” she teased as she took his hand.

“Alien technology, this-a-way,” the Doctor said, leading the way down the stairs and through empty hallways. He knew most of the Sontarans were up on the ground floor, attempting to break through the barrier that would let them out of the factory, but he’d been worried that they might have left a guard behind. He should have known the Sontarans would be more interested in warfare than guard duty.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Not-Martha drop her phone back into the pocket of her lab coat. UNIT hasn’t given up firing on the Sontaran ship, he told Rose. I really thought Colonel Mace understood.

Rose brushed her thumb over his as they walked down the stairs, the motion-activated lights turning on overhead as they walked. Can you blame him, Doctor? You say they’ll die if they take on the Sontarans, but if the gas reaches 80%, the whole planet dies anyway.

I know. You’re right. It’s just...

You wish he trusted you. And he does—look at how much he’s been willing to give. Don’t blame him for wanting to do something. It’s his job to protect the planet, after all.

The lights flickered on when they reached the main basement corridor, and the Doctor turned slowly, trying to get a direction from the sonic screwdriver. “This way,” he said when he got a heading.

The beeping of the sonic sped up as they approached a door at the end of the hallway. The Doctor glanced down at the device, then pushed the door open and walked through yet another set of plastic flaps.

A body on a gurney caught his attention immediately, and he and Rose jogged over to their former companion. “Oh, Martha, I’m so sorry.” He pressed his fingers to her throat and breathed a sigh of relief when he felt her pulse. “Still alive,” he told Rose.

Behind him, he heard the click of a safety being removed. He glanced over his shoulder, and Not-Martha had a gun pointed at him.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” Rose growled. She took a step towards Not-Martha, but when the Doctor quickly shook his head, she stopped. You’d better have a plan then, she told him, looking at him through narrowed eyes.

“Wish you carried a gun now?” Not-Martha taunted.

The Doctor turned back to the real Martha, looking for the tube that connected her to the clone. “Not at all,” unable to keep a note of triumph from his voice when he found it.
“I’ve been stopping the nuclear launch all this time.”

The Doctor straightened and turned to face her. “Doing exactly what I wanted,” he said, enjoying the confusion and uncertainty that flickered across her face. “I needed to stop the missiles, just as much as the Sontarans.” He slowly circled her, trying to keep Rose and the real Martha out of the line of fire. “I’m not having Earth start an interstellar war. You’re a triple agent.”

Her brow furrowed as they turned in a slow circle. “When did you know?”

“About you? Oh, right from the start. Reduced iris contraction, slight thinning of the hair follicles on the left temple. And, frankly, you smell. You might as well have worn a t-shirt saying ‘clone.’” He’d come full circle, now standing behind Martha’s head. “Although, maybe not in front of Captain Jack. You remember him, don’t you? Because you’ve got all her memories.”

Something glinted in her eyes, and she lifted her chin. “You’re right, Doctor. I do have all her memories. Enough to know that the best way to get a reaction out of you… is this.”

She moved her arm, and the weapon was now pointed directly at Rose.

“Martha, don’t,” the Doctor growled.

The clone smirked. “But I’m not Martha, remember? I’m a Sontaran operative, following their agenda. And they need to keep Martha Jones unconscious for a while longer.”

The Doctor tried to move himself in between Rose and the clone, but she shook her head and gestured with the gun for him to stay where he was.

He flexed his fingers and reached for Rose over the bond. Get her talking, Rose. If you can distract her, I can unhook our Martha from the machine, and that will debilitate the clone.

Rose stepped towards the clone. “There’s one question I’ve wondered ever since we realised you were a clone,” she said. “Why do the Sontarans care if Earth fires at them?”

Not-Martha smiled condescendingly at Rose, and for a moment, her gaze was off the Doctor entirely. He reached down quickly and grabbed the tube off her neck, and the clone collapsed as Martha gasped for air.

The gun, Rose, he ordered as he supported Martha with hands under her back. He heard the weapon skitter across the floor.

“It’s all right, it’s all right,” he told Martha as she latched onto him. “I’m here, I’m here. I’ve got you, I’ve got you.”

She wrapped her arms around his waist. “There was this thing, Doctor, this alien, with this head.”

Rose’s phone rang in his pocket, and the Doctor let go of Martha and grabbed the phone. “Oh! Blimey, I’m busy.” He accepted the call and brought the phone to his ear. “Got it?” he asked Donna.

“Yes. Now hurry up.”

He raked a hand through his head and started pacing, only sparing a glance for the clone on the floor. “Take off the covering. All the blue switches inside flick them up like a fuse box, and that should get the teleport working.”

“Oh, my God,” Martha gasped. “That’s me.” She started to get off the gurney, but looked at her state
of dress in obvious embarrassment.

“Here.” The Doctor took off his coat and handed it to her, then lay down on his back in the teleport pod.

Rose and Martha shared a smile as Martha pulled the coat on. “I see he hasn’t changed much,” Martha commented as she got down on the floor with Rose and her clone. She reached out for the clone.

“Don’t touch me,” the clone stammered.

“It’s not my fault,” Martha protested. She looked at her clone for a moment, trying to think of the best way to convince her to help them. “The Sontarans created you, but you had all my memories.”

Pain was drawn on the clone’s face in sharp lines. “You’ve got a brother, sister, mother, and father.”

Martha’s heart ached at the thought of her family, out there somewhere, choking to death on the poison gas. “If you don’t help me, they’re going to die.”

“You love them,” the clone observed.

Martha nodded fiercely. “Yes. Remember that?”

There was a loud clanging noise behind them, and then the Doctor demanded, “The gas. Tell us about the gas.”

“He’s the enemy,” the clone cried.

Martha put a soothing hand on her shoulder. “Then tell me. It’s not just poison; what’s it for?” The clone’s eyes were going dull, and Martha knew they didn’t have much time before she died. “Martha, please,” she implored, hoping the use of her name would soften her.

She swallowed hard, and looked right at Martha. “Caesofine concentrate,” she said, her voice raspy. “It’s one part of bosteen, two parts probic five.”

“Clonefeed,” the Doctor groaned. “It’s clonefeed!”

“What’s clonefeed, Doctor?” Rose asked.

Martha looked at him over her shoulder as he launched into a rapid-fire lecture, gesturing with his hands as he spoke. “Like amniotic fluid for Sontarans,” he explained. “That’s why they’re not invading—they’re converting the atmosphere, changing the planet into a clone world. Earth becomes a great big hatchery. Because the Sontarans are clones—that’s how they reproduce.” His eyes widened. “Give them a planet this big, they’ll create billions of new soldiers. The gas isn’t poison. It’s food.”

He ran off again, but Martha honestly didn’t care about the Doctor right now. Her clone was clinging to the metal pole, trying desperately to stay alive.

“My heart,” she stammered. “It’s getting slower.”

Martha shook her head sadly. She’d been trained about this kind of clone in her introduction to UNIT—once the signal was broken between the original and the clone, there was no way to keep the clone alive. And if she knew that, then so did her clone.

“There’s nothing I can do.”
The clone looked at her. “In your mind, you’ve got so many plans. There’s so much that you want to do.”

“And I will.” Martha nodded. “Never do tomorrow what you can do today, my mum says, because —”

“Because you never know how long you’ve got. Martha Jones. All that life.”

The fervent desire to have that life for herself was written on the clone’s face, and Martha wished there was a way she could give her that. She’d insisted earlier that this wasn’t her fault, but it wasn’t the clone’s fault, either. She’d been brought into existence to serve a purpose, and now that her purpose was over, she would die.

It wasn’t fair. Life was more than that. They stared at each other for a long moment, and then the clone finally died.

The Doctor looked up when Rose’s shadow appeared on the floor of the teleport pod. *Martha’s clone just died. Felt kinda out of place over there.*

He nodded, then finished what he was doing on the controls. Donna’s harsh whisper of his name echoed in the pod a second later, at the same moment as the lights all came on. He reached up and grabbed the phone.

“Yeah?” he whispered.

“Blue switches done.”

Before he could cheer, she said one more sentence.

“But they’ve found me.”

The Doctor leapt out of the teleport pod and pointed the sonic screwdriver at the controls. “Now!”

Donna materialised a moment later, still holding his mallet and gasping and panting in fear. “Have I ever told you how much I hate you?” she shrieked as she hugged him.

He squeezed her tight, then pushed her towards Rose. “Go hug Rose,” he told her. “Got to bring the TARDIS down.” He watched Rose as he manipulated the controls on the teleport with the sonic screwdriver. When she smiled in relief, he grinned back at her. The TARDIS was back where they’d left her.

“Right, now. Martha, you coming?” he called out as he deadlocked the teleport system open so the Sontarans couldn’t lock him out again.

She stood up and held out her phone as she walked towards him. “What about this nuclear launch thing?”

“Just keep pressing ‘N,’” he instructed. “We want to keep those missiles on the ground.”

“There’s two of them,” Donna stuttered, looking from the Martha wearing his coat to the one dead on the floor.

Rose put her hand on Donna’s back and guided her to the teleport pod. “She’s a clone, Donna. It’s a long story.”

The Doctor grinned at them. “Here we go. The old team, back together. Well, the new team,” he
amended as he reset the coordinates he wanted the teleport to connect to.

“We’re not going back on that ship!” Donna cried out, her voice shrill with panic.

“No, no, no. No,” the Doctor reassured her. “I needed to get the teleport working so that we could get to”—He pressed the button and the ATMOS factory disappeared, replaced by the Rattigan Academy—“Here. The Rattigan Academy, owned by…”

Luke stood in the middle of the room, pointing a gun at the teleport pod. “Don’t tell anyone what I did,” he babbled, and the gun shook dangerously in his hands as he walked towards them. “It wasn’t my fault, the Sontarans lied to me, they—”

The Doctor met Luke halfway, snatched the gun out of his hands, and tossed it away. “If I see one more gun,” he muttered as he strode out of the room.

_What are you going to do, Doctor?_ Rose asked as they reached the “visioning lab.”

Luke was building devices to terraform a new planet. I’m going to use it to terraform Earth instead.

Donna, Martha, and Luke arrived as he started running around the lab, gathering the parts he needed. “Caesofine gas—that’s why the Sontarans had to stop the missiles. They were holding back.” He looked at the slightly curved bottom of one part and shook his head, then spun around and grabbed his mallet out of Donna’s hand and banged it, hard. “Because caesofine gas is volatile, that’s why they had to use you to stop the nuclear attack. Ground to air engagement could spark off the whole thing.”

“What, like set fire to the atmosphere?” Martha asked incredulously.

The Doctor nodded as he fit the ignition pin into place. “Yeah. They need all the gas intact to breed their clone army. And all the time we had Luke here in his dream factory. Planning a little trip, were we?” he snarled as he used the sonic to weld the pieces together.

Luke hunched his shoulders and crossed his arms over his chest. “They promised me a new world,” the teen said petulantly.

“You were building equipment, ready to terraform El Mundo Luko so that humans could live there and breathe the air with this.” He put the final piece in place and the lights turned on. “An atmospheric converter.”

The Doctor draped the cables over his neck, then picked up the device and raced out to the park in front of the house. What little bit of clearing they’d been granted by the _Valiant_ was rapidly filling with the caesofine gas again.

“That’s London,” Donna mumbled, sounding shell-shocked. “You can’t even see it. My family’s in there.”

He pressed his lips together. They all had family in London, and if this didn’t work… “If I can get this on the right setting.”

“Doctor, hold on,” Martha ordered. “You said the atmosphere would ignite.”

The atmospheric converter clicked onto the right setting, and he jumped up and ran back a few steps. “Yeah, I did, didn’t I?” he said, then pressed the button.

An energy pulse shot up into the sky and disappeared in the fog. A moment later, they heard an
explosion, and the caesofine gas caught on fire.

The back-blast from the explosion hit them, and then the fire started moving, following the fuel.

“Please, please, please, please, please, please, please,” the Doctor mumbled.

The fire burned for an unending thirty seconds, and then it disappeared, leaving blue skies behind. “Oh yes!” the Doctor cheered, punching the air.

“He’s a genius,” Luke stammered.

“He’s the Doctor,” Rose said.

The Doctor wanted to bask in her pride, but he knew the Sontarans wouldn’t take the loss of their clone world lying down. “Now we’re in trouble,” he grunted as he picked up the atmospheric converter and raced back to the front room of the house.

He set the device down on the desk and used the sonic screwdriver to adjust the firing mechanism, putting it on a timer instead of a simple trigger ignition. “Ninety seconds should be enough,” he mumbled to himself as he worked.

“Enough for what?” Rose asked.

Reconnecting the last wire started his ninety seconds. The Doctor moved fast as he picked the weapon back up and carried it into the teleport pod. “Sontarans are never defeated. They’ll be preparing for war. I have to stop them.” He hefted the device. “I’ve recalibrated this for Sontaran air,” he explained.

“But you put it on a delay, because you have to give them a choice,” Rose realised.

“Exactly.” He pressed the teleport, and as he disappeared, he told her, *I love you.*

Rose’s fear buffeted him for a moment, then he felt her try to control it so it wouldn’t distract him. It was a gesture he appreciated, since he was now on the Sontaran ship, staring straight into the face of General Staal.

“Oh, excellent,” the Sontaran said.

The Doctor set the atmospheric converter down and grabbed the trigger. If they thought he had to press the button to get the device to go off, they wouldn’t expect it to be on a timer.

*Fifty seconds left.*

“General Staal, you know what this is,” he said, rocking back and forth on his feet until he was back within arm’s reach of the teleport controls. “But there’s one more option. You can go. Just leave. Sontaran High Command need never know what happened here.”

“Your stratagem would be wise if Sontarans feared death, but we do not. At arms,” Staal ordered. Sontaran soldiers filled the room, helmets up and weapons at the ready.

The Doctor sighed; he’d expected this from the Sontarans, but he didn’t like the thought of killing an entire ship of soldiers. “I’ll do it, Staal. If it saves the Earth, I’ll do it.”

“A warrior doesn’t talk; he acts,” Staal scoffed.

*Twenty-five seconds left.*
“I am giving you the chance to leave,” the Doctor pleaded desperately.

“And miss the glory of this moment?”

Over the tannoy, another Sontaran announced, “All weapons targeting Earth, sir. Firing in twenty.”

_Fifteen seconds._

“I’m warning you,” the Doctor said, his fingers twitching towards the teleport controls.

“And I salute you. Take aim.”

_Ten seconds._

“I’ll do it.”

“Then do it!”

The Doctor dropped the trigger and slammed his hand down on the teleport control. The last thing he saw as he disappeared from the ship was the sudden realisation on Staal’s face.

Rose threw herself into his arms when he rematerialised, and he welcomed her hug. The mixture of relief and regret when he won the day by killing the other side was always difficult to deal with.

_You did what you had to do, Doctor,_ she told him as she ran her hand through his hair soothingly. _You gave them a choice, and they still were going to destroy the planet._

He sighed and pressed a kiss to her neck. _I know. Thank you for reminding me._

She squeezed him tight, then let go of him and took his hand instead.

The Doctor glanced around at his team. How much fun could they have if they travelled with both Donna and Martha?

Then he spotted Luke Rattigan, shifting towards the door. “Oh, no you don’t,” he told the teenager, collaring him quickly. “You can claim all you want that the Sontarans lied to you, but I bet you understood those fifty-two deaths perfectly. You were willing to let people die so you could have your own planet.”

“It’s not… people don’t… I was tired of being an outsider!” he exclaimed.

The Doctor took a zip tie out of his pocket and bound his wrists together, then looked at Rose over the top of Luke’s head. “Rose, call UNIT and get us a ride out of here.”

She nodded and pulled out her phone, and he focused his attention on the teen again. “No, you felt like your intelligence entitled you to more attention, more praise than the world gave you. And when they didn’t fall at your feet, the way you thought you deserved, you cast them aside.” The Doctor growled in the back of his throat as he dragged Luke outside. “An entire planet sentenced to die, and all because one teenager had delusions of grandeur.”

Luke scuffed the toe of his trainer against the gravel driveway. “I know. You’re right; I know.”

The Doctor blinked. He hadn’t expected that. “Really?” he asked skeptically. “The sudden change of heart wouldn’t have anything to do with the fact that you’re being taken into custody, would it?”

A scowl crossed Luke’s face, but then he sighed. “No. It was watching you, Doctor. Because I used
to think that I was the cleverest person in the world, and that meant people should praise me. But you—
you’re way more clever than I’ll ever be, and you use it to help people. You went up on that ship
even though you knew they might shoot you on sight.” Luke looked over the Doctor’s shoulder. “I’d
never do something like that.”

The Doctor tilted his head and looked down at the teenager. He really was just eighteen, he
remembered. Plenty of people who did stupid things at eighteen went on to be fine, upstanding
citizens. Okay, so maybe most of those people didn’t agree to turn the entire planet over to an alien
force, but the theory held true.

“We’ll see what UNIT wants to do with you,” he said, keeping his answer as non-committal as
possible.

oOoOoOoOo

Donna slept the night in her old bed. They’d only lived in this house for a little more than a year
before she’d left, so it still didn’t feel like home. Instead of childhood trinkets, the few knickknacks
were the things she’d picked up on her travels.

No one woke her up the next morning, and when she came downstairs after getting a hot shower, her
granddad handed her a cup of coffee. “Your mother is off doing the shopping,” he explained.
“Didn’t want to wake you—thought you looked done in when you came home last night.”

Donna snorted. “It’s never stopped her before.”

“Now, Donna,” he said. “Remember, she thought we were all going to die last night.”

That triggered a memory of the one other time Sylvia Noble had let her daughter have a lie-in
without nagging at her to get up: the day after her almost-wedding.

“Yeah, I suppose.” Donna took a sip of coffee, then looked at her granddad. “I’m going back out
there with them, Gramps,” she said quietly.

“Well of course you are! My granddaughter, helping save the world!” He beamed and patted her on
the shoulder. “I always felt like you were meant for more than just a regular life.”

The front door swung open and Sylvia walked into the house, groceries in hand. “The streets are
half-empty. People still aren’t driving. There’s kids on bikes all over the place. It’s wonderful.
Unpack that lot, I’m going to see if Suzette’s all right.”

Donna and her granddad shared a look, and then he shook his head. “I won’t tell her. Best not. Just
keep it as our little secret, eh?”

“Yeah,” Donna said, trying to ignore the wistful notion that maybe someday, her mother would be
proud of who she really was.

“And you go with them, those amazing friends of yours. You go and see the stars, and then bring a
bit of them back for your old Gramps.”

Donna’s throat closed up at the sight of her granddad’s tears, so she stood up and walked around the
table until she could wrap her arms around his shoulders and press a kiss to the top of his head.

“Love you,” she managed to say through the tears that threatened. She squeezed his shoulder, then
walked out of the house, away from the one thing it was hard to leave behind.
Rose poured Martha another cup of coffee. She’d come over for breakfast that morning, and they’d spent an hour just catching up on everything that had happened since they’d seen each other last.

“So you’ve worked with Jack a few times?” the Doctor asked.

Martha nodded. “I’m the closest thing there is to a liaison between UNIT and Torchwood. Since I know Jack already, it works out.”

Rose leaned back and took a sip of her tea. “Now, there’s one more thing we haven’t talked about.”

Martha blushed and tucked her hair behind her ear. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“See, that’s it.” Rose raised an eyebrow. “You keep smiling, like you’re thinking about some secret you have. Who is he?”

Martha sighed, but she smiled happily. “Tom. Tom Milligan. We met at the end of that year, and then when everything went back to normal, I looked him up. He’s a doctor working in paediatrics.”

“Oh, a doctor?” The Doctor straightened his tie. “I hear we make excellent romantic partners.”

Martha rolled her eyes. “We’ve been together for about four months. But he’s in Africa right now, so…” As the sentence dangled, unfinished, she wrapped her hands around her coffee mug and stared down into it.

Rose nodded, then pushed back from the table. “Come on, Donna should be back any minute.” She had a hunch that Martha’s relationship wasn’t completely perfect, but she wasn’t going to push for answers until her friend was ready to talk about it.

The door opened as they reached the console room and Donna walked in, her lips pressed together in a slight grimace.

“How were they?” asked Martha.

Donna shrugged. “Oh, same old stuff.” She wiped a tear from her face. “They’re fine.”

Rose looked at their two companions, current and former. Somehow she’d never thought of their friends meeting up on Earth after travelling with them, but this adventure with the Sontarans had shown her how valuable it could be to have a network of friends who knew each other and knew how to get in touch with them, when necessary.

*Maybe we could take one trip together to cement their friendship and get Team TARDIS going.*

She tilted her head back and looked at the Doctor. When he nodded, she nudged Martha with her elbow. “Hey, why don’t you come along with us for a trip? Just one quick adventure with the new team, for old times’ sake?”

Martha sighed and ran her hand over the railing. “Oh, I have missed all this, but, you know…” She nodded firmly. “I’m good here, back at home. Plus, I’ve got Tom, and who knows when the Doctor would bring me back?”

Rose, Martha and Donna all laughed when the Doctor rolled his eyes. “All right, all right.”

Martha started for the door. “But this still isn’t goodbye,” she said, waving her finger at them. “You’d better come as quickly the next time I call as you did this time.”
Rose felt a glimmer of the TARDIS’ intent a second before the doors slammed shut. “What are you doing?” she yelled at the ship, circling the console, looking for an idea.

“What? What?” the Doctor demanded as he did the same thing. The time rotor was chugging up and down, so they were definitely in flight, but there were no indications anywhere of where they were going or why.

“Doctor, don’t you dare!” Martha clung to a strut as they rocketed through the Vortex on a rather bumpy ride.

“No, no, no. I didn’t touch anything.” He grabbed the monitor and pulled it around to face him. “We’re in flight. It’s not me.”

“Where are we going?” Donna shouted.

“No clue,” Rose said tersely, staring at the blank nav panel. “She’s not telling us anything. Wherever we’re going, it’s supposed to be a surprise, I guess.”

“Well both of you listen to me.” Martha tried to cross her arms over her chest, but quickly reached out for the console when she started to fall. “You take me home. Take me home right now!”

“We can’t, Martha,” Rose snapped. “If we could, we would, but we can’t, all right?”

Martha’s eyes narrowed, and Rose knew she’d sounded just like the Doctor, once again.

“So you can’t stop it,” Donna said, her voice rising in pitch a little as they hit a patch of turbulence. “But why’d she just take off like that, without any warning? And she seemed to want you along, Martha, the way she slammed the doors in your face.”

Time spun around Rose, pulling them away from the ever-present nexus of timelines down one golden path. The TARDIS hummed in the back of her head, and Rose took a deep breath, then closed off her awareness of the future as much as possible.

The ship hit a temporal bump, and Rose laughed out loud when she was jolted into the Doctor. Martha and Donna looked at her with wide, frightened eyes, and she grinned at them.

“Hold on tight, ladies!” she crowed. “There’s something big coming.”

Chapter End Notes

And they're off! I hope you're ready for some big, big changes coming up.
The TARDIS rattled and shook as she took them to her unknown destination. *Rose, can you…* the Doctor asked as he tried—unsuccessfully—to turn a wheel that would park them in the Vortex.

*She seems pretty set on taking us someplace, but I’ll try.* Rose reached out for the ship, trying to persuade her to relinquish control back to them. In response, the TARDIS threw up a wall so fast it gave both Rose and the Doctor an instant headache.

“Ow!” they moaned in unison.

“What the hell’s it doing?” Donna demanded. She clung to one of the coral parts of the console, trying not to get thrown to the ground.

“The control’s not working.”

The next bit of turbulence knocked the Doctor off his feet. He threw his hands out and grimaced when the hard metal grating bit into his palms. *Better than my face,* he thought as he jumped to his feet and shook them quickly.

“Rose, can you get her to stop?” Martha asked.

Rose shook her head. “Already tried. She was not impressed,” she said drily. “I don’t know where we’re going, but she’s pretty determined to take us there.”

“You know,” Donna grunted, “when you told me your ship was sentient, I didn’t know it meant she could just decide to go off without asking.” The TARDIS shifted, and Donna shrieked and dropped into a low crouch so she wouldn’t fall. “You are completely impossible!” she yelled at the ceiling as the ship gyrated through the Vortex.

“Oh!” the Doctor protested. “She’s not impossible. She’s just… a bit unlikely.”

The console sparked and the TARDIS spun through a horrible section of turbulence, then as suddenly as she’d started, she stopped. The Doctor lost his balance and fell back onto the jump seat. For a moment, he stared up at the time rotor as he got his breathing under control, trying to figure out what had just happened.

*She wanted to take us here,* Doctor, Rose said as she stood up and brushed her knees off.

He nodded and leapt to his feet. Donna and Martha were both sprawled out on the grating, staring up at the time rotor with wide eyes as they panted for breath. “Come on, you two!” he said, offering each of them a hand and pulling them up. “No time to waste!”

Rose was already waiting for him by the door when he grabbed his coat and shoved his arms into the sleeves. He laughed when he saw the excitement sparkling in her brown eyes, then jogged down the
ramp and took her hand.

“Allons-y, Rose Tyler!” he chirped as they opened the door together.

He paused for just a second as he took in what looked like an abandoned railway service tunnel. He didn’t know what he’d been expecting, but it certainly wasn’t this. “Why would the TARDIS bring us here, then?” he muttered.

“Well, let’s find out.” Rose pulled away from him, and they both ran their hands over the crates that filled the tunnel, then sniffed at the dirt they collected.

“Oh, I love this bit,” Martha breathed.

“I thought you wanted to go home,” Donna countered.

“I know, but all the same, it’s that feeling you get.”

“Like you swallowed a hamster?”

Martha’s confession had made the Doctor and Rose smile, but Donna’s rejoinder made them laugh—laughter which stopped abruptly when a door banged open behind them.

“Don’t move!” a male voice barked. “Stay where you are!”

The Doctor clenched his jaw when he heard the recognisable click of automatic rifles being cocked. He and Rose exchanged a quick glance before turning around.

Three men in their early twenties were pointing rifles at them. The man in the lead, whose shaggy hair made him look younger than the others, waved his gun at them. “Drop your weapons,” he ordered.

The Doctor and Rose raised their hands, and Donna and Martha copied them. “We’re unarmed,” the Doctor assured the soldiers. “Look, no weapons. Never any weapons. We’re safe,” he said, turning his hands back and forth to prove they were empty.

The second soldier straightened slightly, surprise showing in his wide eyes. “Look at their hands. They’re clean.”

The leader blinked, then he nodded slightly. “All right, process them. Him first,” he ordered, gesturing to the Doctor.

Rose grabbed onto the Doctor’s hand as two of the soldiers rushed at them. They tried to pull her away from him, but she laced their fingers together tightly and glared at all three men. “Oh no,” she told them. “If you want one of us, you get us both.”

They shrugged. “That’s not a problem.” The leader came forward, and together, the three of them frog-marched the Doctor and Rose down the tunnel.

“Oi, oi,” the Doctor squawked. “What’s wrong with clean hands?”

Rose ground her teeth together when the soldiers shoved the Doctor’s free hand into a cylinder. She was ready to turn on them and demand they set the Doctor free, but he shook his head.

_Not while they’re pointing guns at us—please, love, be careful._

She growled her displeasure, but stayed where she was, keeping his hand firmly in her own.
There was a soft whooshing sound as the machine activated, and Rose felt the Doctor wince in discomfort. “Something tells me this isn’t about to check my blood pressure.”

Rose relaxed just slightly with his sarcastic aside, but a moment later, she felt the stabbing pain in her own right hand and the Doctor grunted. Ignoring the Doctor’s plea, she wheeled on the gun-toting soldiers.

A hint of gold flickered in her peripheral vision as she glared at the men. “What the hell are you doing to my husband?” she barked, her hands on her hips.

The man closest to her blinked, and his weapon wavered a bit. Then he shook his head and straightened his back. “Everyone gets processed,” he said, sounding like he was explaining something to a small child.

“It’s taken a tissue sample,” the Doctor muttered.

Rose’s stomach rolled at the idea of these strangers having a sample of the Doctor’s DNA, but a moment later, that concern was overshadowed when the stinging in her hand increased to almost unbearable levels.

The Doctor hissed in pain and tried to flinch away from the machine, but it held him fast. “Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow, ow. And extrapolated it. Some kind of accelerator?” he guessed.

The machine let him go and he backed up several steps, staring down at his hand. Rose could hear his short, fast breaths as he tried to process what had just happened. She cozied up beside him and took his hand in her own.

*What’s wrong, Doctor?* she asked as they looked down at the shallow cut.

*I think…* He swallowed hard, and she realised he was actually feeling a bit nauseated. *I think they just…*

A pair of metal and glass doors they hadn’t noticed before slid open, and steam poured out into the tunnel. Rose could make out a figure standing on the other side, and as the steam cleared, she caught her first glimpse of a slim blonde woman, a little shorter than her, dressed in black trousers and combat boots with a khaki t-shirt.

The outfit was familiar, and she squinted at the woman for a moment before she gasped. If you gave her a jumper and a leather jacket, it was exactly what Rose’s first Doctor had worn.

Plus, staring at her, Rose felt something, a tingling in the back of her head. *Doctor, is she…*

He looked away from the newcomer to meet Rose’s gaze, and his pupils were completely blown in shock. His lips moved to form an answer, but before he had a chance, the first soldier stepped forward and handed the young woman a gun.

“Arm yourself,” he said, like it was some kind of ceremony.

Rose kept a worried eye on the Doctor as he watched the woman expertly check over her weapon, removing the cartridge to check her ammunition, then replacing it with swift, economical movements. His eyes were wide, and he barely noticed Donna and Martha join them, until Martha put a hand on his shoulder.

“Where did she come from?” she asked, always needing to understand the science.
The Doctor didn’t look away from the new soldier. “From me,” he answered, sounding dazed.

“How? Who is she?” Donna asked, while Rose sucked in a sharp breath. “From you?”

The Doctor swallowed hard and turned his hand so he could hold one of Rose’s. Understanding the truth was one thing; accepting it was quite another. “Well, she’s... well, she’s my daughter.”

The young woman grinned up at him, dimples showing on both cheeks. “Hello, Dad.”

For once, the Doctor was speechless. What was the appropriate response when you were greeted by the fully grown daughter who had just been extrapolated from your DNA? Zeus never had to deal with this, he thought, rubbing at his forehead.

His lack of response didn’t faze his daughter. She hopped down off the dais and followed the soldier who seemed to be in charge of this little expeditionary group.

“You primed to take orders; ready to fight?” he asked her as they walked away from the progenation machine.

The two took up position behind what the Doctor suddenly realised looked an awful lot like a barricade. “Instant mental download of all strategic and military protocols, sir,” she answered as the other two soldiers joined them. “Generation five thousand soldier primed and in peak physical health.” A wide smile stretched across her face, displaying the dimples once more. “Oh, I’m ready.”

The Doctor’s queasiness doubled; not only did he now have a child he’d never asked for, she’d been bred to be a soldier. He should have known—that was the most common use of progenation.

He took a deep breath and hung back a bit, trying to put distance between himself and this woman. If she were truly his daughter, she wouldn’t be a soldier.

After a moment, Donna turned to him and asked, “Did you say... daughter?”

Rose’s eyes were on him, but he couldn’t look at her right now. They’d never really talked about kids, since their genetics were just incompatible enough to make accidental pregnancies impossible. If either of them ever felt like they wanted children, they could discuss their options at that point. And here he suddenly had a daughter—though, a grown-up daughter was quite a different thing from raising a child together.

“Mmm.” He nodded his head. “Technically.”

“Technically how?” asked Martha.

“Progenation,” Rose said suddenly. “Reproduction from a single organism.” She looked at him, an eyebrow raised. “Right, Doctor? She’s your daughter, but no one else’s.”

He nodded, then turned to Donna, who still looked a little baffled by the concept. “Progenation means one parent is biological mother and father,” he explained, keeping an eye on the soldiers as he talked. They seemed to be setting mines around the tunnel, and that was rarely a good idea. “You take a sample of diploid cells, split them into haploids, then recombine them in a different arrangement and grow. Very quickly, apparently.”

The loud crash of a door being forced open sounded from the other end of the tunnel. “Something’s coming,” the young woman said, and a moment later, shadows appeared on the tunnel wall.

The Doctor shifted to stand partially in front of Rose and put an arm up in front of Donna and
Martha. The guns, the explosion they’d just heard… he didn’t think the newcomers were just coming to greet the neighbours.

Amphibious creatures came into view, with their heads in tanks so they could still breathe in the open air. Despite himself, the Doctor took half a step towards this new species before the gunfire drove him back.

“It’s the Hath!” one of the soldiers yelled.

“Get down!” the Doctor’s daughter yelled back at them.

Machine gun fire filled the tunnel. The Doctor eyed the brick walls, then nodded quickly. Even though they were well out of the line of fire, the thought of ricocheting bullets had him dragging Rose and Donna behind some crates.

Martha found her own hiding place, and the Doctor made eye contact with her to make sure she was all right. She nodded quickly, but he barely had time to feel relieved before one of the soldiers ruined it all.

“We have to blow the tunnel,” he shouted. “Get the detonator.”

One of the other two soldiers had fallen just the other side of their hiding place, and the Doctor darted out to care for him. “I’m not detonating anything,” he snarled as he cradled the man’s head in his hands, trying to find a pulse.

The leader ignored him. “Blow the thing! Blow the thing!” he ordered, and out of the corner of his eyes, the Doctor saw the young woman dart out from cover and grab something off the ground.

The Doctor stood up when it was clear that the fallen soldier was dead, but a much bigger problem presented itself. High-pitched squeals reached his ear, and when he scanned the tunnel quickly, he spotted one of the Hath dragging Martha away, behind the TARDIS.

“Martha!” he yelled, then he saw the detonator in the young woman’s hands. “No. Don’t.”

He lunged for her, but before he could yank the detonator out of her hands, she tilted her chin back and smacked the button. The Doctor growled low in his throat, but an alarm blaring through the tunnel told him that he didn’t have time to yell at her before the explosion went off. Instead, he wheeled around and raced around the corner, scanning the tunnel to make sure Rose and Donna were getting to safety, too.

A moment later, a flash of heat filled the tunnel, followed by a blinding white light, and the explosion nearly knocked them to the ground. Smoke billowed around them, taking the Doctor back to the Titanic when he lost sight of Rose. But this time, he was rational enough for the bond to keep him calm. She wasn’t injured; there was no reason to be upset.

When the light faded and the smoke cleared, Rose was at his side. Together, they walked around the corner, hoping to find Martha. Instead, they came face-to-face with a pile of debris, blocking them off from the TARDIS—and from their friend.

Rose stared at the pile and took in the vaguely apologetic hum from the ship. The TARDIS knew this would happen, she realised. She took a deep breath and nodded once. In that case, all of this was why they were on this planet in the first place. No point getting riled by it.

The Doctor hadn’t yet come to that realisation. He’d wheeled on his daughter and was yelling at her, gesturing wildly at the debris separating them from Martha and the TARDIS as he did. “You’ve
sealed off the tunnel. Why did you do that?"

Her mouth dropped open slightly. "They were trying to kill us."

The Doctor glared at her, and her eyes glittered rebelliously. Watching the two of them, Rose wondered if the Doctor could see how much like him his daughter was.

“But they’ve got my friend,” he countered.

“Collateral damage,” she said, and Rose winced at her cool tone. That would not win the Doctor over. “At least you’ve still got them,” she added, nodding to Donna and Rose before pointing to the one remaining soldier. “He lost both his men. I’d say you came out ahead.”

“Her name’s Martha,” Donna spat out. “And she’s not collateral damage, not for anyone. Have you got that, GI Jane?”

The Doctor tapped his fingers against his legs. “I’m going to find her,” he muttered. Rose nodded, and they started in the direction of the TARDIS, intent on moving the bricks and broken concrete out of the way.

But they’d only gone two steps before the young soldier pumped his rifle and pointed it at them. “You’re going nowhere. You don’t make sense, any of you. No guns, no marks, no fight in you. I’m taking you to General Cobb. Now, move.”

The explosion had caught Martha by surprise, and as she slowly came to, feeling the ache in her bones from being knocked to the ground by the blast, she remembered why she didn’t actually miss travelling with the Doctor and Rose. Smoke tickled her nose and throat, and she coughed a few times before opening her eyes and carefully sitting up.

A small fire burned on her right, but that was forgotten when she glanced over her shoulder and spotted the Hath who had dragged her away from the TARDIS, sitting on the ground with his arm hanging limply at his side. He made a little bubbly-groan noise, and Martha crawled over to his side.

“Hold on, I’ve got you.” She put her hands on his shoulder and looked him in the face. “Is it your arm, yeah?” The Hath bubbled again, but that wasn’t enough of an answer for Martha. “Is that a yes?” He nodded his head, and she took a deep breath and shifted closer to him. “Let me examine it. Keep still.” The Hath cradled his arm close to his body and rocked back and forth, and Martha held up her hands, gesturing for him to stop moving. “Still, yeah? No move.”

The Hath nodded again, which given the language barrier was all the patient consent Martha was going to get today.

She put her hands back on his shoulder and tried to find the bone. “Half fish, half human?” she muttered. “How am I supposed to know?” She found a bony protrusion and ran her hand along the ridge. “Is that a shoulder? Feels like a shoulder.” What felt like a bone seemed to be sticking out of the socket at an odd angle. “I think it’s dislocated.”

A door clanked open, and a group of armed Hath joined them, brandishing their weapons at Martha. She held up her hands, but she refused to move away from the injured alien.

“I’m trying to help him. I am a doctor and he is my patient, and I’m not leaving him.”

The leader of the new arrivals tilted his head slightly and bubbled at her, leaving Martha wondering
exactly how much the Hath could understand of human speech. That could be investigated later, though; first she needed to take care of her patient.

She turned back to the Hath sitting beside her and grasped his shoulder in the proper procedure. “Now, this is going to hurt. One, two, three.” She rotated the bone sharply, and it clicked loudly as it slotted back into place.

The sound alarmed the other Hath, and they cocked their weapons again. Martha quickly held her hands up, not wanting to get shot. But the one she’d helped raised his own hands, and the entire group relaxed, lowering their weapons.

Martha got to her feet and brushed the dirt off her hands. “Now, then. I’m Doctor Martha Jones. Who the hell are you?”

The Doctor stared at the automatic rifle pointing at him and Rose, then forced his body to relax. “General Cobb, eh?” he said. “What about you? What’s your name then?”

The young man tilted his head and a furrow appeared between his brows. “I’m Cline.”

“Heello, Cline. I’m the Doctor, this is Rose, and that’s Donna. You really don’t need to take us to see General Cobb—we just want to get our friend Martha, and then the four of us will be out of your way, permanently. I promise.”

He held his breath, but Cline shook his head. “See, that’s what I mean. You don’t make sense. Why would you want to disappear instead of staying to fight?” He straightened, and a glint entered his eyes. “No, you’re going to talk to General Cobb, and he can decide what to do with you.” Cline spun around and charged down the tunnel, leaving the rest of them to follow after him.

The young woman was the first to follow, then Donna shrugged and walked alongside her. The Doctor hung back, casting sideways glances at Rose as they walked. He had no idea how to even begin a conversation about what had happened, but he wasn’t foolish enough to think gaining a child could go without some discussion. Just… hopefully later. On the TARDIS. Alone.

Donna stared at the new member of their party as she and the soldier led them to this General Cobb bloke, whoever he was. When she’d left home to travel with the Doctor and Rose, it hadn’t occurred to her that she’d be part of an entourage. Working with Martha had been fun, and now she was trying to work out how things would change when this girl came with them.

Neither the Doctor nor Rose were talking to her though, so Donna moved up to walk beside her. “I’m Donna. What’s your name?”

The girl shrugged. “Don’t know. It’s not been assigned.”

Donna blinked. Not knowing your own name? Being full-grown and not even having a name, perhaps? “Well, if you don’t know that, what do you know?” she asked as they turned a corner into another tunnel.

“How to fight,” she said succinctly.

“Nothing else?” Rose asked.

Donna glanced over her shoulder and winced when she saw the inscrutable expression on the Doctor’s face.
“The machine must embed military history and tactics, but no name,” he said, his voice flat. “She’s a generated anomaly.”

Donna heard a noise from Rose at that proclamation, and she decided to let the Doctor’s wife lay into him for that particular bit of insensitivity.


“Jenny.” The girl tilted her head, and a smile crossed her face. “Yeah, I like that. Jenny.”

Donna fell back a few steps and nudged the Doctor in the side. “What do you think, Dad?”

He ran his hand over the back of his neck and glanced over at Rose, who was purposely not looking at them. “Good as anything, I suppose.”

A muscle flexed in Rose’s jaw, and Donna could see the family spat coming from a mile away. She jogged back up to walk beside Jenny again, then leaned down and whispered in the younger woman’s ear.

“Don’t look now, but your parents are about to have what’s commonly referred to as a domestic.”

Jenny glanced over her shoulder, then looked up at Donna, a confused frown furrowing her brow. “Is Rose my mum then? I thought I didn’t have a mum.”

Donna shrugged. “She’s your dad’s wife. Up to you what you want to call her. I mean, you’re a grown woman, so you don’t really need parents.”

The Doctor was torn between relief when Donna stopped nagging at him and the uncomfortable realisation that there wasn’t a buffer to keep the brewing argument with Rose at bay any longer.

He lagged back enough to take her hand. I’m sorry.

What for?

He shot her a glance. Sudden, spontaneous procreation? Without discussing it with you? I was under the impression that children were one of those topics human couples talked about before springing on their partner.

Rose snorted and dropped his hand. Do you actually think I’d be upset about that? They took a tissue sample at gunpoint. You didn’t have a choice.

The Doctor shoved his hands into his pockets. Then what are you upset about?

She stopped in the middle of the tunnel and glared at him. Are you actually serious right now?

Yes! The Doctor threw up his hands. I know you’re angry with me, but I have no idea why.

“Rose?”

Jenny’s tentative use of her name drew Rose’s attention, and she looked over at the young woman—the Doctor’s daughter.

“Yes, Jenny?”

“Donna just told me… Are you my mum?”
“Yes.”

“No.”

Rose and the Doctor answered simultaneously, then glared at each other again. Rose ground her teeth together and tried to smile at Jenny. “Apparently, we still need to talk about that.”

The Doctor glanced down at her, then moved up to walk with Cline. “So, where are we? What planet’s this?” he asked as they climbed a flight of stairs that led to a large, open room.

“Messaline,” Cline said. “Well, what’s left of it.”

Rose crossed her arms over her chest and stared straight ahead as they climbed a flight of stairs and entered a large room with a domed roof. More progenation machines lined the room, and new soldiers were being generated in each one as they walked by.

Cline disappeared for a moment, then Rose caught sight of him talking to an older man on the edge of the room. All around them, people were preparing for war, handling ammunition and weapons and instructing the newest soldiers in where to go.

“But this is a theatre,” Donna said, and Rose looked around at the structure with new eyes, seeing the gallery at one end and the stage at the other, and the long, narrow shape of the room.

“Maybe they’re doing Miss Saigon,” the Doctor muttered caustically as he took a seat.

Rose pressed her lips together to keep from snapping at him. She knew the Doctor didn’t handle surprises well, and Jenny was certainly a big one. But Rose had caught the way Jenny’s shoulders had slumped when he’d said she wasn’t her mum, even if the Doctor hadn’t.

She still remembered how it had felt when the parallel version of her dad rejected her—and she’d had the slight comfort of knowing he wasn’t really her dad. The Doctor was Jenny’s father, and he was treating Jenny worse than Pete had treated her.

Donna kept looking around, and Rose focused on her. At least she was still being rational.

“It’s like a town or a city underground. But why?”

“Buried to keep it safe when the fighting broke out?” Rose guessed. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Cline leading an older man over to them. “Come on, Donna. Let’s look around while the Doctor talks to the general.”

The Doctor sighed when Rose walked away, but he didn’t have time to argue with her, or try to suss out why she was so upset with him. Cline and Cobb were almost in front of him, and he pasted on a fake smile.

“General Cobb, I presume.”

The man’s bushy eyebrows drew together. “Found in the western tunnels, I’m told, with no marks. There was an outbreak of pacifism in the eastern zone three generations back, before we lost contact. Is that where you came from?”

The Doctor nodded quickly. “Eastern zone, that’s us, yeah. Yeah. I’m the Doctor, and that’s Rose Tyler and Donna,” he said, pointing at them as he introduced them.

“And I’m Jenny,” his daughter spoke up quickly, just as unwilling to be ignored as her father.
The man scowled at Jenny, and despite himself, the Doctor felt just a bit protective of his daughter.

“Don’t think you can infect us with your peacemaking,” Cobb warned darkly. “We’re committed to the fight, to the very end.”

“Well, that’s all right.” The Doctor stuck his hands in his pockets and smiled. “I can’t stay, anyway. I’ve got to go and find my friend.”

General Cobb straightened up and shook his head. “That’s not possible. All movement is regulated. We’re at war.”

“Yes, I noticed,” the Doctor drawled. “With the Hath. But tell me, because we got a bit out of circulation, eastern zone and all that. So who exactly are the Hath?”

Cobb’s eyebrows rose up to his hairline. “Follow me,” he said, motioning to them with one arm.

The Doctor looked over at Rose and Donna, standing on a bench looking out a window. A moment later, Rose looked at him and nodded when he gestured with his chin for them to follow. He watched her tap Donna on the shoulder, then when they both jumped off the bench, he lengthened his stride to rejoin Cobb, Cline, and Jenny.

General Cobb led them to the backstage area and gestured at the unfinished walls. “Back at the dawn of this planet, these ancient halls were carved from the earth. Our ancestors dreamt of a new beginning. A colony where human and Hath would work and live together.”

The Doctor frowned; that certainly wasn’t what he’d seen earlier. “So what happened?”

“The dream died. Broken, along with Hath promises. They wanted it all for themselves.” Pride glittered in Cobb’s eyes. “But those early pioneers, they fought back. They used the machines to produce soldiers instead of colonists, and began this battle for survival.”

“Speaking of survival,” Donna broke in, “we looked out the windows earlier, and there’s nothing but earth outside. Why’s that? Why build everything underground?”

“The surface is too dangerous,” Cline explained.

Rose and Donna looked at each other, then Rose pressed on. “Well, then why build windows in the first place?”

“And what does this mean?” Donna asked, pointing at a metal plate with a series of numbers stamped on it.

“The rites and symbols of our ancestors,” General Cobb said pompously. “The meaning’s lost in time.”

“How long’s this war gone on for?” the Doctor asked.

“Longer than anyone can remember,” Cobb answered, his eyes haunted by the memory of years at war. “Countless generations marked only by the dead.”

The Doctor and Rose both recoiled at the meaning implicit in those words, but it was Rose who voiced the question. “You’ve been at war for that long?”

“Because we must,” Jenny said.

The Doctor tensed when he looked over at this woman who was supposed to be his daughter, but
shared none of his beliefs about war.

“Every child of the machine is born with this knowledge,” she continued. “It’s our inheritance. It’s all we know. How to fight, and how to die.”

Rose snorted. “Blimey, and I thought my schooling left out the important bits. At least I learned basic maths and science.”

“How big is the city?” the Doctor asked.

General Cobb motioned for them to follow him. “We have a map,” he said, and when he hit a button on the side of a chrome canister, it projected a map.

The Doctor stroked his face. “Does this show the entire city, including the Hath zones?”

“Yes. Why?” asked General Cobb.

“Well, it’ll help us find Martha.”

Cline cut him off. “We’ve more important things to do.” He smiled at the Doctor, Rose, and Donna. “The progenation machines are powered down for the night shift, but soon as they’re active, we could breed a whole platoon from you three.”

Donna shook her head quickly. “I’m not having sons and daughters by some great big flipping machine.” Jenny shifted beside her, and Donna turned and held her hand up in apology. “Sorry, no offence, but you’re not… well, I mean, you’re not real.”

Donna laughed in disbelief. “You’re no better than him,” she said, pointing at the Doctor. “I have a body, I have a mind, I have independent thought. How am I not real? What makes you better than me?”

Rose’s vehement agreement struck the Doctor, and he tugged at his ear, unable to deny the truth in Jenny’s words. Jenny was certainly real, and if she was, she was also his daughter. That acknowledgement didn’t make him any more willing to bring her into their life, though.

“Well said, soldier,” Cobb said, his voice gravelly. “We need more like you, if ever we’re to find the Source.”

The Doctor raised his eyebrows. “Ooo, the Source. What’s that, then? What’s a Source?” He looked from Cobb to Jenny and back again. “I like a Source. What is it?”

“The Breath of Life,” Cobb said reverently.

“And what’s that when it’s at home?” Rose asked.

Cline answered before Cobb could. “In the beginning, the great one breathed life into the universe. And then she looked at what she’d done, and she sighed.”

“She.” Jenny smiled. “I like that.”

The Doctor nodded. “Right. So it’s a creation myth,” he said, before looking back at the map. There was something more there—he just couldn’t pinpoint what it was.

“It’s not myth,” Cobb insisted. “It’s real. That sigh. From the beginning of time it was caught and kept as the Source. It was lost when the war started. But it’s here, somewhere. Whoever holds the Source controls the destiny of the planet.”
The Doctor had been studying the map while Cline and Cobb explained, and he finally saw the glitch he’d been look for. “Ah!” He smacked the projection, and when it buzzed, another level of detail appeared just for a moment. “I thought so. There’s a suppressed layer of information in this map. If I can just…”

He pulled the sonic screwdriver out of his pocket and pointed it at the projector. A moment later, the map more than doubled in size.

“What is it—what’s it mean?” Donna asked.

The Doctor put his sonic screwdriver back in his pocket. “See? A whole complex of tunnels hidden from sight.”

General Cobb’s eyes widened. “That must be the lost temple. The Source will be inside. You’ve shown us the way. And look, we’re closer than the Hath. It’s ours.”

Despite her irritation with the Doctor, Rose sympathised fully with his frustration as General Cobb rallied his troops and barked out orders. This wasn’t the outcome he’d expected when he’d revealed the rest of the map to the soldiers.

“Tell them to prepare to move out,” Cobb ordered as he strode back into the main part of the theatre. “We’ll progenate new soldiers on the morning shift, then we march. Once we reach the temple, peace will be restored at long last.”

Rose jogged forward and planted herself directly in front of the general. “Maybe I’m missing something,” she said, “but it seems to me that if you really wanted peace, you could just… stop fighting.”

“Only when we have the Source.” Cobb’s expression was implacable. “It’ll give us the power to erase every stinking Hath from the face of this planet.”

“Hang on, hang on.” The Doctor grabbed Cobb by the elbow and forced him to turn around. “A second ago it was peace in our time. Now you’re talking about genocide.”

Cobb shrugged. “For us, that means the same thing.”

Rose whistled. “Wrong thing to say, mate,” she muttered.

“Then you need to get yourself a better dictionary,” the Doctor said as he stuck his hands into his trouser pockets. “When you do, look up ’genocide.’” He leaned forward, the lines of his face tight with anger. “You’ll see a little picture of me there, and the caption will read, ‘Over my dead body.’”

Rose glanced over the Doctor’s shoulder at Jenny and smiled at the furrow on her brow as she took in everything her father did and tried to make sense of it. She knew Jenny’s warlike attitude put the Doctor off, but if she could be shown there was a different way…

Cobb laughed in disbelief. “And you’re the one who showed us the path to victory. But you can consider the irony from your prison cell. Cline, at arms.”

The young soldier whipped out his weapon, and Donna and Rose both jumped back half a step to avoid being hit. “Whoa! Be careful with that!” Rose said, nudging the barrel of the gun away from herself.

“Yeah,” Donna agreed, staring down at the weapon. “Cool the beans, Rambo.”
The Doctor was staring at the gun, and Rose gave him a telepathic nudge to refocus his attention. The muscle in his jaw twitched, but for once, she couldn’t really offer any reassurance. They were being led away at gunpoint—it was hard to soften that reality.

“Take them,” Cobb ordered. “I won’t have them spreading treason.” His lips twisted into a smirk. “And if you try anything, Doctor, I’ll see that your woman dies first.”

“Every bloody time,” Rose muttered, hoping to distract the Doctor before he did something stupid, like throttle the man. She glared at the general. “You know, you military lot are all so sexist, I can’t stand it. How do you know I’m not the important one? Maybe you should be threatening to kill him if I don’t cooperate.” The corner of the Doctor’s mouth twitched, and Rose winked at him.

Cobb and Cline looked at each other for a long moment, then Cline gestured with his gun. “Come on. This way.”

The Doctor pointed at Cobb. “I’m going to stop you, Cobb. You need to know that.”

Cobb rolled his eyes. “I have an army and the Breath of God on my side, Doctor. What’ll you have?”

“This.” He tapped his forehead, indicating his brain.

Cobb was unimpressed, which only showed how little he understood. “Lock them up and guard them,” he ordered Cline.

“What about the new soldier?” Cline asked, pointing to Jenny with his gun.

Cobb pursed his lips and considered, but finally, he shook his head. “Can’t trust her. She’s from pacifist stock. Take them all.”

He pushed Jenny into the Doctor’s arms, and the Doctor looked down at his daughter, wondering what exactly the TARDIS had been thinking, bringing them here.
Chapter Sixteen: Identity Crisis

Cline led them to a small alcove at the back of the theatre that had been separated from the rest of the room by a door made of prison bars. A gust of wind swirled through the corner, and Rose pulled her coat more tightly around her.

“Being locked up seems like a regular event when travelling with you,” Donna commented as Cline slammed the cell door shut behind them.

Rose rubbed at her forehead. “It happens,” she admitted reluctantly.

Donna nodded and looked around at their temporary accommodations. “More numbers,” she commented, seeing the plate above the cell door. “They’ve got to mean something.”

The Doctor slouched down on the bench that ran along the wall. “Makes as much sense as the Breath of Life story,” he grumbled as he scrubbed his hands over his face.

Jenny’s eyes widened. “You mean that’s not true?”

Rose answered before Donna could, her words coming quickly as she paced the cell. “Not exactly,” she explained as she ran her hand through her hair. “But I bet there’s something real in that temple that became the myth of the Breath of Life.”

The Doctor nodded. “A piece of technology, a weapon.”

Donna looked from the Doctor to Rose and back again. “So the Source could be a weapon and we’ve just given directions to Captain Nutjob?”

He straightened up. “Oh, yes.”

“Oh, but it could be worse, Donna,” Rose told her.

Donna wondered at the hint of laughter in her eyes, until the Doctor groaned and raked his hand through his hair. “Really, Rose? Did you have to?” he whined. “You know what happens every time someone says something like that.”

She smirked unrepentantly. “Then I guess we’d better start thinking of a way to get out of here, shouldn’t we?” She tossed him her phone. “Get in touch with Martha and find out where she is, then we’ll stop Cobb from slaughtering the Hath.”

As the Doctor caught Rose’s phone, the look on Jenny’s face struck him. It was the same half-smile Rose wore when she’d noticed something and was waiting for him to catch on. “What, what are you, what are you, what are you staring at?” he asked as he opened Rose’s address book.

Jenny shook her head and chuckled. “You keep insisting you’re not soldiers, but look at the two of you.” She pointed at them, a broad smile on her face. “Drawing up strategies like a proper military team.”

“Oh, no no,” the Doctor and Rose said together.

“We’re trying to stop the fighting,” the Doctor concluded.
Jenny crossed her arms over her chest and frowned. “Isn’t every soldier?”

The Doctor scratched at his cheek. “Well, I suppose, but that’s, that’s…”

Everyone in the room was looking at him, and the Doctor was particularly aware that Rose’s earlier amusement had faded back into impatience. She didn’t like that he was keeping Jenny at a distance, he realised, and the thought hurt. Of all the people here, he’d thought she would be the one who’d understand why he was so reluctant to accept another child—another family member he would one day lose.

Anxious to change the subject, he muttered, “I haven’t got time for this.” He tapped Martha’s name, then brought the phone to his ear and waited for the call to connect.

“Doctor?”

He jumped to his feet. “Martha, you’re alive!” He heard a hissed, “Yes!” from Rose, and he smiled at her.

“Doctor!”

Martha’s relief came through clearly over the phone, and the Doctor quickly tamped down the automatic guilt he felt. This wasn’t his fault.

“Oh, am I glad to hear your voice,” Martha continued. “Are you all right?”

“I’m with Rose and Donna. We’re fine. What about you?”

“And, and Jenny,” Donna said, pointing to the young woman. “She’s fine too.”

Standing a few feet away, Jenny raised her eyebrows and stared at him, clearly waiting for a response. The Doctor remembered her reaction when Donna had told her she wasn’t real, and he swallowed back as much of his irritation as possible.

“Yes, all right,” he agreed reluctantly. “And, and Jenny. That’s the woman from the machine. The soldier. My daughter, except she isn’t, she’s, she’s…” He sighed and redirected the conversation as Jenny and Donna both rolled their eyes at him. “Anyway. Where are you?”

“I’m in the Hath camp. I’m okay, but something’s going on. The Hath are all marching off to some place that’s appeared on this map thing.”

The Doctor groaned. It hadn’t occurred to him that the Hath might have a map too, and that they all might be connected. “Oh, that was me. If both armies are heading that way, there’s going to be a bloodbath.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“Just stay where you are.” He craned his neck for a glimpse of the human soldiers, preparing for battle. The last thing he wanted was for any of them to be caught in the middle of the coming battle. “If you’re safe there, don’t move, do you hear?”

“But I can help,” Martha protested.

“I know, but—” The Doctor paused when three beeps sounded in his ear. “Martha? Martha!”

He sighed, then hit the end call button and tossed the phone back to Rose. “Disconnected. Maybe her battery went flat. Anyway, she says the Hath are marching on the Source, too. We really need to
figure out a way out of here.”

A raucous cheer caught their attention. The Doctor and Rose went to listen by the bars, and exchanged a grimace when they realised the soldiers were all shouting, “To war!”

“They’re getting ready to move out,” the Doctor muttered. “We have to get past that guard.”

Rose nodded. As she glanced around the cell, looking for a way out, she saw Jenny get up and march towards the cell door, her ponytail bobbing with every step.

“I can deal with him,” she said, her jaw set.

The Doctor caught her by the arm as she walked by. “No, no, no, no. You’re not going anywhere.”

Jenny blinked up at him, and Rose could feel her confusion and irritation. “What?”

The muscle in his jaw twitched. “You belong here with them.”

Donna opened her mouth, but Rose shook her head quickly and their friend leaned back and crossed her arms over her chest. Then Rose took a deep breath and looked at the Doctor, wondering what the best approach would be. She’d caught his hurt and disappointment a few minutes ago and understood his reluctance a little more, but that didn’t change the fact that Jenny was an individual with the right to choose her own life.

“Doctor, since when do we leave someone behind who wants to help us?”

He blinked at her—God, they really were so alike—and his mouth opened and shut twice as he tried to come up with an answer.

After a suitable pause, Rose pressed on. “Jenny wants to come with us. And…” She hesitated, but the fact couldn’t be avoided. “She’s your daughter, Doctor. Maybe she got more than your old fashion sense. Can’t you see the renegade in her?”

“She’s a soldier.” Deep furrows creased his brow. “She came out of that machine.”

Rose’s hands shook, and she planted them on her hips. “Give me your stethoscope,” she demanded, her voice sharp. This was a risk, but since she knew Jenny was telepathic, it was a fairly safe bet that she also had two hearts.

The Doctor’s anxiety and anger were twisted so tightly together that Rose couldn’t separate them. But after staring at her for a long moment, he slumped and handed her the stethoscope.

“Thank you.”

Rose let her fingers brush against the Doctor’s as she took it from him. *I know this is hard, Doctor. I’m sorry today is dredging up painful memories. I promise I wouldn’t if there were another way.* He smiled weakly, and she turned to Jenny.

“What are you doing?” the young woman asked as Rose put the stethoscope in her ears and held out the bell.

“Nothing bad,” Rose promised. “Just hold still.”

Jenny nodded, and Rose pressed the bell to the left side of her chest first, just long enough to hear a heartbeat. Then she moved it to the right side.
She couldn’t help her smile when she heard the second heartbeat. She felt the Doctor’s confusion when he saw her smile, and she beckoned to him. *Come listen, love. I know this isn’t how we expected the day to go, but... just listen, please.*

The Doctor swallowed, but he took the stethoscope and listened as Rose held the bell first to Jenny’s left heart, then her right. His throat was thick, and it was hard to force words out, but he managed. “Two hearts.”

“Yeah.” Rose’s hand rubbed his back, and he leaned gratefully on her strength.

Jenny’s gaze darted between them. “What’s going on?”

“Does that mean she’s a, what do you call a female Time Lord?” Donna asked, speaking up before either the Doctor or Rose could answer.

“What’s a Time Lord?” asked Jenny.

The Doctor took a deep breath and looked at this young woman who he could almost see as his daughter. “It’s who I am. It’s where I’m from.”

Comprehension dawned in her eyes. “And I’m from you.”

The Doctor stumbled back and leaned against the wall. Rose stood beside him, and he reached for her hand. “Yeah, but... you’re... and they’re...” He pressed his lips together and gathered his thoughts. “They’re all gone. I’m the last one.”

Jenny took half a step towards him. “What happened?”

He sighed and rested his head against the wall. “There was a war,” he answered, his voice quiet as memories crept up on him, despite his efforts.

Her eyes widened, filled with childlike innocence despite having been born to war. “Like this one?”

The Doctor pinched the bridge of his nose and shook his head. If only the Time War had been something as small and easily handled as this war seemed to be. “Bigger,” he told Jenny. “Much bigger.”

She nodded, accepting that. Then she looked at him frankly, and he knew what was coming. “And you fought, and killed?”

The Doctor swallowed hard, then nodded. “Yes.”

“Then how are we different?” she asked, her voice quiet and even.

Rose sucked in a breath, but the Doctor squeezed her hand. Much as the words stung, it was a fair question. *It’s all right, Rose.*

He looked at Jenny. “War changes you, Jenny. You think, ‘I need to do this for the cause,’ whatever your cause is, but then when you’re done, you’re not the same person you were when you began.” He ran a hand through his hair and sighed, feeling the weariness of his age more than he usually did. “You fight and you kill for this noble ideal, and one day you realise that the other side has their own ideal that they think is just as noble as yours. And you look around at the people you’ve killed and you wonder... which one of you is right?”

The silence in the damp cell was deafening. Jenny stared at her father, noticing the lines on his face...
that hadn’t been there before painful memories had been dredged up. The way he’d talked about war… it wasn’t anything like the memories and information that had been downloaded into her when she was created.

She didn’t know if he was right, but she did understand that he wanted to stop the killing. And maybe if she helped, he would finally believe she really was his daughter.

“Right.” The Doctor’s eyes blinked open, and she nodded at him. “So, we need to get out of here. I can help with that.”

He sighed wearily and waved at the door. “Be my guest.”

Jenny ignored the resignation and doubt in his voice. Instead, she took a breath and rubbed her hands together, then she sashayed over to the spot where Cline was standing, just out of earshot of their conversation.

Jenny wrapped her hands around the bars of the cell door. “Hey.”

He looked over at her, and a half-smile turned up the corners of his mouth. “I’m not supposed to talk to you. I’m on duty.”

“I know.” She rolled her eyes, as if her imprisonment was a joke she and Cline shared. “Guarding me.” She slid down a few steps closer to him. “So, does that mean I’m dangerous, or that I need protecting?”

Cline laughed, then turned around and came closer. “Protecting from what?”

“Oh, I don’t know.” Jenny said coyly, watching as he stepped within arm’s reach. “Men like you?” she suggested, then grabbed his shoulder and pulled him in for a kiss.

She might have surprised the man, but he certainly wasn’t protesting—not until she pulled his sidearm out of the holster and pointed it at his belly. Then his eyes widened and he slowly eased away from her.

Jenny kept her grip on Cline’s shoulder tight enough that he couldn’t get away. “Keep quiet and open the door,” she suggested in a soft voice.

Surprise and amusement buzzed in her head. Jenny hadn’t figured out where those extra emotions were coming from, but when she glanced over and saw the broad grin on Rose’s face and the way her dad was rubbing at his forehead, she got a glimmer of an idea.

They locked Cline in the cell, then strode through the theatre and down the same flight of stairs they’d taken earlier. Jenny was bursting with questions she wanted to ask her father, but she knew sound would echo in a stairwell, so she kept quiet. When they reached a turn in the stairs and heard footsteps coming up on the other side, she was glad she’d been careful.

The Doctor pulled her back around the corner before the guard could spot her. “That’s the way out,” he whispered.

Jenny looked down at the pistol in her hands. “I don’t… what do we do?” she whispered, then basked in the surprised pride in his eyes.

Rose started to answer, but Donna pushed forward first, looking down at the Doctor and Jenny. “Let me distract this one. I have picked up a few womanly wiles over the years.” She tossed her ginger hair back over her shoulder and took a step forward.
The Doctor caught her by the shoulder and pushed gently. “Let’s save your wiles for later. In case of emergency.”

Jenny had been watching Rose through the whole conversation. As soon as Donna had cut her off, she’d moved closer to the Doctor and shoved her hand into his coat pocket. Jenny’s eyebrows went up when Rose’s arm disappeared up to her elbow—how deep were his pockets, anyway? And how much could he have in there, that she was still fishing around for whatever she was looking for?

Her eyes brightened just as the Doctor put Donna off, and she pulled her arm out to show them a toy mouse. “I think this will work, don’t you?”

The Doctor grinned and took it from her. “Perfect, Rose,” he whispered. “Thank you.” He wound it up, then set it on the floor. They all watched as it scurried towards the guard, catching his attention and distracting him from watching in their direction.

Jenny saw her chance, and she took it. As soon as the guard was looking away, she slipped out from behind the corner and karate chopped the man on the back of his neck, sending him to the ground.

Her father huffed slightly, and she looked back at him. His mouth was open, but after a moment, he snapped it shut and ran his hand through his hair. “Not what I would have done, but it worked,” he admitted, reluctant though he sounded. He picked the toy mouse up and dropped it back into his pocket. “They must all have a copy of that new map. Come on. This way.”

Rose wrapped an arm around the Doctor’s waist for a one-armed hug. Then she reached for his hand and they jogged through the tunnels together. Thank you, for giving Jenny a chance, she told him.

The Doctor shot her a sideways glance. This really meant a lot to you, he finally realised. Why?

Rose took a deep breath. Because Jenny reminds me of me four years ago, talking to the other Pete Tyler, trying to get him to see me as his daughter. I know it wasn’t fair to him, since he wasn’t actually my dad at all… but you are Jenny’s dad, and she wanted your acceptance just as badly as I wanted Pete’s.

The Doctor squeezed her hand, and Rose could feel his apology over the bond.

It’s all right, she told him. I’m over it, mostly. But the look on her face earlier when you told her I wasn’t her mum…

Jenny moved around to her other side. “Can… Can I ask a question?”

Rose looked up at the Doctor, who was finally looking at Jenny without any animosity in his eyes. Then she smiled at Jenny. “Yeah, of course.”

“So… I’m not sure if it’s normal… but I think I can feel what you and my dad are feeling.”

The Doctor stumbled, and Rose realised he really hadn’t noticed Jenny’s presence in his mind. That explains a lot. “Yeah… we’re telepathic, me and the Doctor. It’s…” She hesitated for a moment, then continued. “It’s a Time Lord thing. I’ll let the Doctor explain… But anyway, it appears the Doctor passed that on to you when you were created.”

A furrow appeared in the young woman’s forehead. “But if it’s a Time Lord thing, how do you have it? I thought Dad was the only Time Lord left.”

Rose groaned and rubbed at her forehead. “Ah. That’s… complicated.”
“Later?” Jenny asked hopefully.

“Absolutely,” Rose promised.

The Doctor could feel it now, the third presence in his head beside Rose and the TARDIS. A Time Lord mind shining bright, with the familiarity of a family connection. He tried not to think about what that might mean, together with Jenny’s two hearts. They had to find Martha and get off this plant before he could even consider all the possibilities.

He shook his head and glanced down at the map in his hand, and just in time. “Wait.” He drew up short and looked at the wall. “This is it. The hidden tunnel.” He pulled his sonic screwdriver out and scanned the seemingly blank wall. “There must be a control panel.”

“It’s another one of those numbers,” Donna said, walking past him to stare at a sign overhead. “They’re everywhere.”

Rose joined her. “They look like they were left by the original builders,” she observed. “Look, the signs are just as worn as the rest of the building.”

The Doctor glanced over his shoulder and nodded. “Some old cataloguing system, maybe.”

“You got a pen? Bit of paper?” Donna asked.

The Doctor stuck his sonic in his mouth and rummaged around in his pockets while Donna continued talking about the numbers.

“Because, do you see, the numbers are counting down. This one ends in ‘one four.’” She accepted the notepad and pen he handed her and started jotting the numbers down. “The prison cell said ‘one six.’”

Jenny was watching them with an intent frown on her face. “Always thinking, all of you,” Jenny said. “Who are you people?”

The Doctor looked at her as he knelt in front of the wall, still looking for the control panel. “I told you. I’m the Doctor.”

“The Doctor,” she repeated. “That’s it?”

Rose put her hand on Jenny’s shoulder. “That’s his name, Jenny. Unconventional, but your father is an unconventional man.”

The Doctor smiled at Rose, then watched Jenny run her tongue over her teeth before asking her next question. A bolt of familiarity struck him, and Rose nodded and shot him a smile.

*She’s definitely your daughter, love.*

Jenny’s gaze darted between the three of them before finally settling on the Doctor. “Are you an anomaly, too?”

The Doctor rolled his eyes. “No.”

“Oh, come off it,” Donna muttered. “You’re the most anomalous bloke I’ve ever met.”

The sonic pinged, and the Doctor yanked a board off the wall. “Here it is,” he crowed when he spotted the control panel.
“And Time Lords,” Jenny pressed. “What are they for, exactly?”

The question completely threw the Doctor, just like it would have if someone had asked what humans were for. The idea that a sentient species had to have a purpose was just completely outside his way of thinking. “For?” he repeated. “They’re not—they’re not for anything,” he said as he worked to trigger the lock on the door to the tunnel.

Jenny put her hands on her hips and tilted her head. “So what do you do?”

Rose squeezed his shoulder, and he nodded, grateful to let her explain while he worked to get the door open. “We travel, Jenny. Through time and space—though he does sometimes forget to mention the time travel.”

Donna put the paper in her pocket and walked over to Jenny. “They save planets, rescue civilisations, defeat terrible creatures. And run a lot. Seriously, there’s an outrageous amount of running involved.”

Jenny’s telepathic signature blazed with excitement, with the itch to travel the stars. That wanderlust was the last piece the Doctor needed to convince him she was his daughter, because it certainly wasn’t a typical Time Lord trait.

He jumped to his feet and crowed in victory as the door finally slid open. “Got it!”

Machine gun fire and voices echoed down the corridor, and he could hear Cobb in the distance calling for squad five to go with him.

The Doctor twirled the sonic screwdriver once before sticking it in his pocket. Then he grinned at the three women and bounced lightly on his feet. “Now, what were you saying about running?”

Martha stared at the useless phone, and gritted her teeth together as she considered the Doctor’s final order to stay where it’s safe. “I thought Rose had trained you to stop doing that,” she muttered.

She looked around the base and spotted the single Hath who’d been left behind with her. He was the one she’d helped before, named Peck. Hope sparked in her heart, and she ran over to him, holding her phone out. “I need to charge it up. I need power. Do you understand?”

He ignored her completely in favour of messing further with the map. He turned the projector, and the expanded map tilted slightly.

“‘There’s even more?’ Martha watched as the map continued to rotate and she realised what she was looking at. “In 3D—oh, you’re a clever Hath,” she exclaimed, tapping him on the shoulder. She looked at the location everyone had been so excited about before. It now extended in both directions—down into the tunnels, and above the surface. “So this is where everybody’s headed?” she asked, pointing to the structure that went deep into the ground.

The Hath burbled an agreement, and she eyed the path the soldiers were all taking to get to the buried portion of the the room. “But look, those tunnels sort of zig-zag. If I went up and over the surface in a straight line, I’d get there first.”

The Hath shook his head and his bubbles moved aggressively.

“Why not?” Martha asked, understanding a negative when she heard one.
He punched another button on the console, and a chart was superimposed over the map, graphing out the chemical makeup of the air.

“Are these readings for the surface?” He bubbled an affirmative, and she studied the numbers quickly. “Well, it doesn’t look too bad. Nitrogen and oxygen about eighty/twenty. That’s fine. Ozone levels are high…”

Her voice trailed off when she read the final number. “And some big radiation spikes.” She mentally calculated how long she could be out in that kind of radiation, and it didn’t seem like too big a risk. “But as long as I’m not out there too long.”

He looked at her and protested, but Martha shook her head. “I have to find my friends.” It wasn’t negotiable, so she started jogging away from the Hath before he could argue further.

Whatever he said next didn’t sound like a protest, though. Martha paused at the door and looked back at him, and she recognised the curiosity in his eyes even if she couldn’t understand a word he said.

She smiled. “Come on, then.” She gestured with her head for him to follow, and he straightened up and jogged after her.

He had second thoughts when they reached the staircase that led to the surface, however. Martha was about halfway up the stairs when she heard another gurgle of protest, and she turned around to see what the problem was now.

The Hath stood at the foot of the stairs, shaking his head. Martha sighed and put a hand on her hip. “You can stay down here and live your whole life in the shadows, or come with me and stand in the open air.” She gestured to the sky, still out of sight. “Feel the wind on your face. What’s it going to be?”

He groaned and shook his head.

“It’s up to you,” Martha admitted. She couldn’t force him to come with her. “But nothing’s going to stop me.”

She climbed the remaining stairs and pushed the hatch open. *Oh, that’s the wind on my face all right,* she thought as she was exposed to the elements of the surface. The dark planet reminded her of Malcassairo, the planet at the end of the universe where they had met the humans hoping to find Utopia… and found the Master. Another shiver went through her, this time remembered fear, and she buttoned up her jacket, wanting whatever meagre protection it could offer from the chill.

Three moons cast a ghostly light on the alien world. Rocky spires rose up from the plain, and between the shapes and the way the moonlight filtered through the haze, it looked like a Van Gogh painting.

A moment later she heard a grunt and turned to see the Hath climb out after her. She grinned at him. “I knew you couldn’t resist it.”

His bubbled response didn’t sound overly happy, and Martha raised an eyebrow. “Ah, language,” she teased, then huffed in amusement when he rolled his goggle eyes at her. “Come on.”

Laughter echoed through the corridor as they ran, and Donna looked over at Jenny, running alongside her. Her eyes were bright with exhilaration, and Donna shook her head.
Like father, like daughter, she thought. They all love to run.

The thought distracted her enough that she nearly ran into the Doctor’s back when he stopped abruptly. She caught herself just in time and looked over his shoulder to see what had stopped him.

The red lasers crisscrossing the corridor did not look welcoming. “That’s not mood lighting, is it?” she asked rhetorically.

The Doctor pulled the toy mouse out of his pocket and tossed it into the lasers. It disintegrated on contact.

“No, I didn’t think so.”

“Arming device,” he muttered, stepping back and looking wildly around the room for the laser controls.

Something else caught Donna’s attention, though, and she tuned out the Time Lord family almost completely. Yet another sign stamped with a number. “There’s more of these,” she said, pulling the notepad out of her pocket and writing down the new number. “Always eight numbers, counting down the closer we get.”

The voices of Cobb and his men were getting closer, and Donna edged back towards the Doctor, Rose, and Jenny. The lasers were still blocking their way, but a moment later, the Doctor grunted in satisfaction.

“Right, here we go.”

Donna glanced down the corridor, where she could see the shadows of the approaching soldiers on the wall. “You’d better be quick.”

“The General.” Jenny raised the gun she’d been holding at her side and stepped towards the voices. The Doctor grabbed her elbow. “Where are you going?” She couldn’t be planning to kill them. He’d really thought he’d gotten through to her.

She glanced towards the advancing soldiers, then up at him. “I can hold them up.”

“No, we don’t need any more dead.”

A wide, cheeky smile crossed her face, so similar to Rose’s and disarming him just as completely. He let go of her elbow and took a step back, frowning down at her as he tried to understand what she was up to.

“I know that, Dad. Seriously, you’re acting like killing is the only way to slow them down. Don’t you know there’s always another way?” Then she winked and spun away from him.

The Doctor’s mouth fell open, and Rose laughed. She reached for his hand, and he laced their fingers together automatically. If you’ve ever wondered what it’s like to be on the receiving end of your impish sense of humour, now you know.

He shook his head and squeezed her hand. That cheek was all you, Rose. By some fluke, my daughter seems to be a perfect blend of the two of us. He brushed his thumb over Rose’s and looked down at her. So, what do you think? Interested in being a mum?

Rose grinned at him and shook her head. Nah, Jenny doesn’t need to be parented. But I’ll be the
cool step-mum, always there to offer excellent advice and listen when she needs to complain about you.

The Doctor rolled his eyes and Rose stretched up to kiss him on the cheek. *All right, you work on that control box,* she told him, letting go of his hand.

Some fifty feet away, Jenny took a deep breath and concealed herself behind a stack of wooden crates. The buzz in her head that Rose had said belonged to her and the Doctor was bright and happy, and she knew—hoped anyway—that they were proud of her.

It was harder to ignore the ingrained instinct to fight when the footsteps got closer. She lifted her weapon automatically, then clenched her jaw and lowered it as she looked around for another way. She was the Doctor’s daughter, and that meant killing only when absolutely necessary.

“Jenny, come on.”

_Thanks, Dad, for giving away that I’m not with you._ Jenny rolled her eyes, and as she did, she finally spotted the distraction she’d been looking for. Relieved laughter escaped Jenny when she stood up and aimed her gun at the ductwork that ran the length of the tunnel.

The soldiers were just coming around the corner when she fired at a hose that led into the ducts. Steam filled the tunnel, and Jenny spun around and ran back to her dad, Rose, and Donna. The tunnel was free of lasers, and her dad’s coat was flapping behind them as they raced for the corner.

Some distant part of Jenny’s mind—the part filled with tactical information and military training—warned her that the lasers wouldn’t stay off for long. She tossed the weapon aside and pumped her arms while she ran, crossing her fingers that she’d make it in time.

Rose had her arms open and Jenny fell into them, only seconds before she heard the whoosh of the lasers relighting. “We are so proud of you,” Rose murmured in her ear as she hugged her tight.

A large hand landed on her shoulder, and Jenny pulled away from Rose so the Doctor could sweep her up into a hug. “Brilliant!” he proclaimed as he spun her around. “You were brilliant. Brilliant.” He let her go and beamed down at her.

Jenny returned his smile, adrenaline making her feel giddy. “I didn’t want to wonder later if I’d done the right thing.”

The hard pounding of boots on the concrete broke up the moment. The Doctor looked at Rose, then jerked his head towards the corridor. Rose nodded and grabbed Jenny and Donna’s hands.

“Time to run again,” she said, then the three women disappeared down the corridor, leaving the Doctor alone to face Cobb.

The lasers would keep Cobb away long enough for the Doctor to say his piece. As Jenny had beautifully illustrated, you always had a choice to use violence or find another way. He had to offer that choice to Cobb.

When the soldiers spotted him on the other side of the lasers, they drew up and primed their weapons. The Doctor sighed and took a step backwards. Maybe it wouldn’t be a choice today, but a warning.

“I warned you, Cobb,” he said, taking another step back. “If the Source is a weapon, I’m going to make sure you never use it.”
Cobb raised his chin defiantly. “One of us is going to die today and it won’t be me.”

When he punctuated that remark by firing his machine gun through the laser beams, the Doctor ducked and ran. Clearly, the choice had been given and made. Now he had to find a way to stop the genocide Cobb and his soldiers were determined to perpetrate.

At a junction in the tunnels, he turned right with barely a pause. His bond with Rose shone brightly in his mind, making it obvious which way to go. And now, it was joined by another telepathic presence.

The Doctor’s footsteps slowed as the full truth of the day sank in. He’d had family before, siblings and children whose minds had been as familiar to him as Jenny’s was quickly becoming.

And he’d lost them. Those who had lived through the worst of the Time War had been silenced in that final moment, along with the rest of his race.

The Doctor flinched against the remembered pain, and a sobering truth slowly worked its way into his conscious mind. If he allowed Jenny into his life, he would face that same pain yet again.
Just looking at the map, Martha had thought taking the shortcut on the surface was the best way to save everyone’s life. After stumbling over the rocky terrain for a few minutes, she understood why her Hath friend had been reluctant to agree. The sulphur in the air made her eyes sting and her lungs burn, but she pushed on.

“It can’t be much further.”

She knew as soon as she said it that she’d broken the Doctor’s cardinal rule to avoid all phrases bearing a resemblance to, “What else could go wrong?” But sadly, it was too late, and a moment later, she tripped over a rock and tumbled head over heels down a rocky slope.

Martha landed with a splash in a boggy pond, and every nightmare she’d ever had about quicksand flashed through her mind as she tried to get to solid ground. Her feet sank into the muck, and no matter how much she flailed and tugged, she only seemed to sink deeper. The water level hit her mid-chest, but if she sank much further, she wouldn’t be able to breathe.

Peck slid down the slope, and she waved frantically. “Help me! I’m sinking. I’m sinking. Help me, Peck. Help me. Help me, Peck.” He reached the edge of the bog and stretched his hand out towards her. “I’m sinking. I’m sinking,” Martha repeated as she struggled against the sludge to get to his hand.

The water was almost up to her neck by now, and she still hadn’t gotten any closer to Peck’s hand. She thought desperately of her family and how devastated they’d be to lose her, and that gave her the strength to keep struggling.

It was only as Peck jumped in that she realised she hadn’t even considered Tom.

Peck’s firm hands on her back propelled Martha to the bank, and she groaned in relief as she pulled herself to safety. She turned around immediately to help him out after her, but his greater mass pulled him under even faster than she’d been sinking.

“Oh, no!”

Peck groaned one more time before he sank beneath the bog, leaving Martha alone on the surface.

“No!” she sobbed as his helmet disappeared. It wasn’t fair—he’d been so kind to her, and his reward had been this grisly death that she had dragged him to.

My fault, she lamented as she started the climb out of the pit. All my fault.

In the back of her head, she could hear Rose insisting she wasn’t to blame, that Peck had made his choices and she hadn’t forced him to come, but she snarled at the mental visage of her friend as she trudged over the barren landscape. Maybe Peck would have died in this war regardless, but he wouldn’t have drowned in a bog. That was her fault.

oOoOoOoOo

The Doctor didn’t say a word when he rejoined them, instead pulling out the map and moving
forward to walk alone. Rose’s eyes narrowed as she studied him, wondering where the sudden change in demeanour had come from.

“So…”

Rose tore her gaze from the tense line of the Doctor’s back to Jenny, who was walking beside her. The young woman was chewing on her bottom lip, and Rose smiled at her in encouragement. “Yes, Jenny?”

“Did you and Dad decide? Are you my mum?” Jenny asked as they turned a corner into a long corridor filled with fuse boxes.

“We’re all waiting for the answer to that one,” Donna muttered, loudly enough for everyone to hear. The Doctor shot her a look over his shoulder, and Rose nudged her with her elbow and shook her head. Donna rolled her eyes, but clamped her mouth shut.

Satisfied that the other woman would let them work out their family issues without interrupting again, Rose turned back to Jenny. She started to tell the young woman she didn’t really need a mum, but something in her blue eyes stopped her—a longing to belong, to find her place in the world by finding her place in their family.

The Doctor had stopped, ostensibly to stare at the map, but Rose knew he was too interested in their conversation to keep walking.

Rose took a deep breath, then smiled at Jenny. “If you want,” she agreed. “Or step-mum. That’s what you call your dad’s wife, usually,” she explained, when Jenny’s forehead wrinkled in a frown. “And we’ll probably get fewer confused looks if you call me Rose, since we look like we’re about the same age.”

Jenny and Donna both laughed, and even the Doctor cracked a smile at that. Truthfully, this was an aspect of not ageing that Rose had never considered. He winked at her before he started walking again.

“All right, Rose,” Jenny agreed. “I was wondering, what’s it like? The travelling?”

Rose couldn’t help the grin that spread across her face. “There’s nothing else like it. Not every day is like today—stopping a war, running from danger. Trouble is just the bits in between, Jenny,” she added, casting a sly look at the Doctor. His shoulders relaxed, and she knew she was pulling him out of his brooding mood.

Donna snorted. “Is that what you tell people?”

“It’s true,” Rose insisted. “Most days we aren’t insurrectionists or freedom fighters. We’re explorers, looking at whole new worlds.”

Jenny sighed. “I’d love to see new worlds.”

The new presence in Rose’s mind was both wistful and restless, and Rose smiled at her. “Oh, you will.” She tugged on the bond as she uttered the promise, and the Doctor turned around. “Don’t you think Jenny’s going to love seeing new worlds?”

Rose knew she was the only one who noticed his minuscule flinch and hesitation. “Oh, I think so,” he agreed, offering Jenny a smile that was a little weak, but genuine.

Jenny looked back and forth at them. “You mean… you mean you’ll take me with you?” she said
when the meaning of their words sank in.

The Doctor couldn’t remain stoic in the face of her excitement, and he finally smiled. “Well, we can’t leave you here, can we?”

Jenny squealed in delight and threw herself at him. “Oh, thank you, thank you, thank you.” The Doctor chuckled and hugged her back, then just as quickly, Jenny stepped back and darted down the corridor ahead of them. “Come on, let’s get a move on.”

“Careful, there might be traps,” the Doctor called out after her, shaking his head when she just kept going.

Rose and Donna exchanged a glance; the Doctor’s smile was completely gone. Rose silently asked Donna to give her a few minutes alone with the Doctor, and Donna nodded.

“I’ll run ahead with her, make sure she doesn’t stumble into any lasers or anything.”

Rose slipped her arm through the crook of the Doctor’s elbow as Donna hurried to catch up with Jenny. Somehow, in the two minutes it had taken the Doctor to catch up with them after talking to Cobb, he’d let his grief take control again.

_I thought you’d changed your mind about Jenny._

He sighed, and she could feel him slump. _I have, mostly. I really do want her to come with us. But…_

Rose offered comfort over the bond, and was relieved when he took it gratefully. _Don’t get too lost in your own head, love,_ she cautioned. _You’ve imagined a dozen ways Jenny could die, and there’s just no purpose in that._

He nodded. _I know. But when I look at her now, I can see them. The hole they left, all the pain that filled it. I just don’t know if I can face that every day._

They were running short on time, but Rose pulled him to a stop and gave him a quick hug anyway. _I know you’re afraid to lose her, when you’ve already lost a family. But remember, you once thought that you couldn’t risk the pain of being with me, either. And didn’t that turn out to be worth it?_

He smiled and kissed her quickly. _Oh, yes._

Rose reached up and rubbed at the furrow in his brow, and it finally softened. _And so will Jenny. You just have to open up and let her in. I’ll be with you, every step of the way._

The Doctor took a shaky breath, but his eyes were brighter. _Thank you, Rose._


The Doctor looked down at his daughter and a slow smile spread across his face. “Love the running.”

Rose took his hand as they took off running, and the Doctor returned her affectionate squeeze. It was in these moments when she gave him the strength to face difficult choices that he loved her most.

The sound of gunfire chased them down the corridor, but suddenly, he heard it ahead of them, too. All four of them skidded to a halt in front of a red wall and looked around for another way out.
“We’re trapped,” Donna said.

“Can’t be.” The Doctor did some quick mental figuring and shook his head. As far as they’d run, they should be there by now. “This must be the temple.” He let go of Rose’s hand and spun around to put his hands on the wall. “This is a door,” he realised. He knelt in front of the control panel and tried to open it with the sonic.

“And again,” Donna said. “We’re down to one two.”

“I’ve got it!” the Doctor crowed when the panel opened, revealing the wiring underneath.

The gunfire was louder now, and voices were interspersed with the sounds of war. “I can hear them,” Jenny announced.

The Doctor pulled out a wire and sonicked it. “Nearly done.”

*I think Donna’s really onto something with these numbers,* Rose told him as their friend kept muttering about the stamped plates.

He spared Donna a quick glance before getting back to work. *I’ll ask her about it once we’re safe in the temple,* he promised.

“They’re getting closer.”

The Doctor rolled his eyes at Jenny. “Then get back here,” he ordered, while Donna kept rambling about the numbers.

“Not yet,” Jenny argued.

He scowled at her back—how long was she planning to wait? Until she could see the whites of their eyes? “Now!” he insisted. Thankfully, the door slid open before Jenny could protest again. “Got it.”

Rose ran into the room first, followed by the Doctor and Donna. Jenny wheeled towards them, a look of controlled panic on her face.

“They’re coming,” she said as she joined them. “Close the door.”

As soon as they were all safe, the Doctor tapped at the control box, closing and locking the door behind them. Jenny rocked back and forth on her heels, looking at him and Rose.

“Oh, that was close.”

The excitement in her eyes was contagious, and he grinned back at her. “No fun otherwise.”

Donna raised her eyebrows and looked at Rose. “Just the bits in between, you said?”

Rose nodded, a smirk turning the corners of her mouth up. “Yep, that’s right!” she agreed.

The Doctor wandered away from them and found a central shaft running from the basement level to the top of the building, high above. “Is it just me, or does this not really look like a temple?”

Rose joined him by the engine coils and caught on immediately. “It looks more like—”

“Fusion drive transport,” he agreed. “It’s a spaceship,” he elaborated for Jenny and Donna’s sakes.

“What, the original one?” Donna asked as she and Jenny joined them. “The one the first colonists
arrived in?"

The Doctor frowned and wrinkled his nose. “Well, it could be, but the power cells would have run
down after all that time. This one’s still powered up and functioning. Come on.”

“We’re missing something,” Rose told him as they raced up a flight of metal stairs to the upper level of
the “temple.” And I think it has something to do with those numbers Donna’s been fixated on.

The Doctor glanced at her. I said I would ask about those, didn’t I? I will, I promise.

But when they reached the upper level, they had a more immediate, pressing concern than
mysterious numbers left on plates all around the planet. Someone was using a blowtorch to get
through the door.

“It’s the Hath,” Jenny said. “That door’s not going to last much longer. And if General Cobb gets
through down there, war’s going to break out.”

The Doctor turned away from the door, not even certain what he was looking for. But when he
spotted the computer terminal, he sighed in relief. Information—that was what they needed.

He found what he was looking for right away. “Look, look, look, look, look,” he said as he put his
specs on. “Ship’s log.”

Messaline Leader One mission log designation XG2482942-372.

“First wave of Human/Hath co-colonisation of planet Messaline,” he read off the screen.

“So it is the original ship,” Jenny said as details of the details of the colonisation plan scrolled across
the screen.

“Co-colonisation?” Rose asked. “Does it explain what happened to that idea?”

The information moved quickly across the screen, but the Doctor was more than fast enough to keep
up with it. “Phase one, construction. They used robot drones to build the city.”

“But does it mention the war?” Donna asked.

When the log mentioned Byzantine Fever, the Doctor had an inkling of what had happened. That
was nearly always fatal to humans. “Final entry…” he mumbled as he read along with the scrolling
text. “‘Mission commander dead. Still no agreement on who should assume leadership. Hath and
humans have divided into factions.’” He pointed victoriously at the screen. Finally they had an
answer. “That must be it. A power vacuum. The crew divided into two factions and turned on each
other. Start using the progenation machines, suddenly you’ve got two armies fighting a never-ending
war.”

“Two armies who are now both outside,” Jenny added.

In the middle of the Doctor’s explanation of what had happened, a flashing red number caught
Donna’s attention. It was a very familiar number, or at least the pattern was familiar. Eight digits,
starting with 6012. She slowly circled the Doctor, her mind whirling as she approached what looked
like a giant digital clock.

“Look at that,” she said, raising her voice a little to get everyone’s attention.

The Doctor sighed loudly. “Yeah, I meant to ask you about the numbers and I kept getting
Donna blinked; when the Doctor had sigh, she’d expected him to be annoyed at her for talking about the numbers again. She hadn’t expected an apology. “Thanks,” she said uncertainly, then shook her head. She’d finally figured it out, and that mattered more than unexpected courtesy. “But listen, I spent six months working as a temp in Hounslow Library, and I mastered the Dewey Decimal System in two days flat. I’m good with numbers.” She looked from her notebook to the numbers on the wall, double-checking her work before saying it out loud. “It’s staring us in the face.”

“What is?” asked Jenny.

Donna turned around, ready to answer Jenny, but she wasn’t prepared to see all three of them looking at her like she had something important to say. The Doctor raised an eyebrow, and she realised she still hadn’t said anything. “It’s the date,” she explained.

The Doctor darted around Jenny and Rose to join her, and Donna pointed at the screen, narrating as she went. “Assuming the first two numbers are some big old space date, then you’ve got year, month, day. It’s the other way round, like it is in America.”

The Doctor smacked his forehead. “Oh! It’s the New Byzantine Calendar.”

Having that validation of her theory gave Donna the courage to tell him the rest of what she’d worked out. “The codes are completion dates for each section. They finish it, they stamp the date on. So the numbers aren’t counting down, they’re going out from here, day by day, as the city got built.”

“Yes. Oh, good work, Donna.”

“Wait a minute,” Rose said. “Wasn’t the first number back in the theatre sixty twelve oh seven seventeen?”

Donna nodded. “Exactly. You’re getting it, Rose.”

The Doctor looked at the two of them, his face blank, and Rose pointed at the clock. “Look at today’s date, Doctor.”

He looked obediently at the display. “Oh seven twenty-four.” He looked back at Donna with wide eyes. “No.”

“What does it mean?” Jenny asked.

“Seven days,” the Doctor said, still sounding like he couldn’t believe it.

For once, Donna allowed herself to be proud of her accomplishment, without thinking about the way her mother would put it down. “That’s it. Seven days.”

Rose shook her head. “Just seven days.”

“What do you mean, seven days?” Jenny demanded, her voice sharp.

The Doctor’s eyes were still wide with excitement when he looked at his daughter. “Seven days since war broke out.”

“This war started seven days ago,” Donna explained to her, since the Doctor was still leaving words out of the explanation. “Just a week. A week!”

Jenny shook her head. “They said years.”
Rose wrapped an arm around her shoulders. “No, Jenny, they said generations,” she reminded gently. “Generations from those machines, like you, born in an instant.” She gnawed on her lower lip for a moment while she thought. “Didn’t they say you were generation five thousand?” she added.

The Doctor nodded slowly as he followed along with what Donna and Rose had figured out. “Yes, they did, Rose—I’d forgotten about that. So, hundreds of generations a day. Each generation gets killed in the war, passes on the legend.” He looked at Donna and Rose, shaking his head in amazement. “Oh, the two of you are absolutely brilliant.”

It was harder for Jenny to accept that the entirety of her history was a misunderstanding. “But all the buildings, the encampments,” she protested. “They’re in ruins.”

“No, they’re not ruined.” The Doctor shook his head. Now that they knew what had happened, so many things made more sense—like why the buildings were buried. “They’re just empty. Waiting to be populated. Oh, they’ve mythologised their entire history. The Source must be part of that too. Come on.”

oOoOoOoOo

The strong winds on the planet’s surface blew sulphurous fumes into Martha’s eyes, and she kept her head tucked down as she climbed over the rocky surface. She had no idea how long she’d been trekking across the alien terrain, or even if she was still going in the right direction.

Then she reached the top of the next hill, and she stared in awe when she caught her first glimpse of the mysterious temple. The building rose from the desolate landscape, its spire pointing to the stars. She cocked her head. Actually, it looks a lot like a rocket silo.

More importantly though, it was close by. She pushed herself to her feet and stumbled across the last fifty metres until she could touch the building. Running her hands along the sides of the entrance, she found a control panel, which thankfully worked to open the door.

Inside, she took a deep breath of clean, warm air. The door slid shut behind her, and she relished the quiet that the absence of wind brought.

After taking a moment to catch her breath, she started exploring. She frowned when she realised the room looked exactly like an engine room, which only supported her earlier thought that the building was a rocket silo.

What is going on here?

But before she could really set her mind to work on the problem, she heard footsteps coming from the other side of the room. Martha ducked behind an engine coil for a moment, but then she spotted a familiar figure and darted out to greet him.

“Doctor!”

“Martha!” He swept her up in a hug. “Oh, I should have known you wouldn’t stay away from the excitement.”

Martha spotted Rose over his shoulder and hugged her as soon as the Doctor let her go, followed by a quick hug from Donna.


“I um”—Martha pointed up—“took the surface route.”
“Positions,” a man’s voice echoed through the room.

The Doctor looked in the direction of the voice. “That’s the General. We haven’t got much time.”

“Right, what are we looking for?” Rose asked. “This Source, what would it be like?”

Martha sniffed when a fragrance hit her nose. “Is it me, or can you smell flowers?”

“Yes,” the Doctor mused. “Bougainvillea. I say we follow our nose.”

The Doctor’s mind raced as he led the way up another flight of stairs. Pieces of the puzzle were finally falling into place. A colonist mission, and a mysterious life-giving Source? And now the fragrance of bougainvillea wafting throughout the entire spaceship? It had to be a terraforming device.

Like the one Luke was going to use? Rose asked, picking up on his train of thought.

Probably. Same idea, at least—take a barren world and make it habitable.

The scent was almost overpowering when they reached the top deck of the ship, and it was no wonder—the entire space was filled with leafy plants.

“Oh, yes,” the Doctor crowed as he turned in a slow circle, taking in the veritable jungle. “Yes. Isn’t this brilliant?”

A globe was perched on a pedestal, the gasses swirling inside it making it glow. The warm air it was putting out created a balmy atmosphere on the hydroponics deck, perfect for growing things but too warm for a wool coat. The Doctor shrugged his coat off and tossed it to the side, then beamed down at the engineering marvel.

Rose stopped in front of it, then reached out her hand and touched it with her finger. “And that’s the Source.”

“It’s beautiful,” Jenny breathed.

Martha tilted her head and looked at the device through narrowed eyes. “What is it?”

“Terraforming,” the Doctor announced. “It’s a”—He glanced down at the controls—“third generation terraforming device.”

“So why are we suddenly in Kew Gardens?” Donna asked.

“Because that’s what it does,” he told her. “All this, only bigger. Much bigger.” He pointed at the globe. “It’s in a transit state. Producing all this must help keep it stable before they finally…”

The simultaneous arrival of Hath and humans interrupted his ramble. The two sides formed ranks on either side of the room, weapons drawn on each other.

Standing by the terraforming device put the Doctor, Rose, and their friends directly in the crossfire. He threw up his hands, hoping he could stop the war before it truly started. “Stop! Hold your fire!”

“What is this?” Cobb growled. “Some kind of trap?”

The Doctor pressed his lips into a thin line; every ridiculous accusation and assertion made it harder to stay patient with Cobb. “You said you wanted this war over,” he reminded the older man.
Anger glinted in Cobb’s blue eyes. “I want this war won.”

The Doctor shook his head. “You can’t win. No one can. You don’t even know why you’re here.” He spun around to look at the people standing behind him. “Your whole history, it’s just Chinese whispers, getting more distorted the more it’s passed on.” He pointed to the terraforming device. “This is the Source. This is what you’re fighting over. A device to rejuvenate a planet’s ecosystem. It’s nothing mystical. It’s from a laboratory, not some creator. It’s a bubble of gasses. A cocktail of stuff for accelerated evolution. Methane, hydrogen, ammonia, amino acids, proteins, nucleic acids. It’s used to make barren planets habitable,” he said, repeating what he’d told Rose.

Both Humans and Hath shifted nervously as he unravelled the entire mythology of their existence, rocking from one foot to the other and adjusting their hold on their weapons. Keeping a wary eye on the guns, the Doctor softened his voice and demeanour, trying to reach them.

“Look around you,” he pleaded, gesturing to the room filled with green plants. “It’s not for killing—it’s bringing life. If you allow it, it can lift you out of these dark tunnels and into the bright, bright sunlight. No more fighting, no more killing.”

The Doctor pulled the globe off the pedestal. “I’m the Doctor, and I declare this war is over.” With those words, he threw it on the ground, breaking the glass and releasing the chemical agents that would begin the terraforming process. The gas escaped and spread through the room in green and gold tendrils, slowly rising to the glass ceiling.

One by one, the soldiers—Hath and human alike—laid down their weapons as the significance of the moment struck them. This wasn’t a time for killing; it was a time for life.

Jenny walked over to him. “What’s happening?” she asked, her voice hushed to match the solemnity of the moment.

He looked up at the high ceiling and imagined what was already starting on the planet’s surface. “The gasses will escape and trigger the terraforming process.”

“What does that mean?”

He grinned down at her, enjoying the excitement and awe in her eyes. “It means a new world.”

Rose’s anger and panic were the Doctor’s first clues that something was wrong. Then she and Jenny yelled, “No!” in unison, and Jenny flung herself in front of him as a single gunshot echoed in the cavernous room.

Rose had only taken a single step before Cobb fired, and now she froze in shock as the Doctor cradled Jenny in his arms and gently lowered her to the ground. Martha and Donna both ran over, Martha immediately going into doctor mode, but Rose could hardly see straight with the way Time was swimming around her.

Two major temporal tipping points were converging on Messaline. The first centred on the Doctor’s reaction to losing Jenny and how that shaped the new colony. The second… Rose pressed a hand to her forehead. The second centred on how Jenny’s presence in their life would change them.

“Jenny? Jenny. Talk to me, Jenny,” the Doctor begged.

The desperation in his voice broke through Rose’s daze, and she moved forward to kneel beside him, resting her hand on his back.

“Is she going to be all right?” Donna asked.
Martha shook her head. Rose wanted to argue, but she held her tongue. It wasn’t time yet. She had to wait.

Martha and Donna got up, and Rose moved around to Jenny’s other side so she could take her hand. Her fingers were limp in Rose’s and she barely looked over at her before staring at the ceiling. Rose followed her gaze and saw the colourful gasses seep out of the ship to the planet outside.


The Doctor’s agony cut through Rose. This was exactly what he’d been afraid of when he’d resisted welcoming Jenny as part of their family.

He grabbed her tighter and rocked back and forth. “Jenny, be strong now. You need to hold on, do you hear me? We’ve got things to do, the three of us, yeah? We can go anywhere. Everywhere. You choose.”

Jenny gasped, and for a moment, she managed to squeeze Rose’s hand. “That sounds good.”

The Doctor placed his palm against Jenny’s cheek and rubbed his thumb over her temple. “You’re my daughter, and we’ve only just got started. You’re going to be great. You’re going to be more than great. You’re going to be amazing. You hear me? Jenny?”

Even knowing what she did, Rose still felt her throat close when she watched Jenny die in the Doctor’s arms. Oh, she wanted to reach out and tell him that this was only temporary, but she couldn’t… he couldn’t know yet. Thankfully, he was too distraught to pick up on her thoughts.

The Doctor’s stomach churned when Jenny’s body went limp. His sobs caught in his throat, choking him as he pulled Jenny close and pressed a kiss to her forehead. A desperate hope welled up inside him, and he looked at Rose, still kneeling on the floor with them.

“Two hearts.” He barely managed to push the words through his tight throat, and he swallowed before trying again. “Two hearts. She’s like me. If we wait. If we just wait.” His eyes burned with tears as he stared at Rose, begging her to agree.

She hesitated, started to say something, then pressed her lips together and shook her head. “Wouldn’t it have started already?” she asked gently. “She’s not going to regenerate, love. I’m sorry. Maybe…” She licked her lips. “Maybe she just wasn’t enough like you.”

“No.” Anger slowly joined the Doctor’s grief as he realised exactly what had killed his youngest child—a deadly combination of an earnest belief in the goodness of humanity, and a willingness to sacrifice herself for others. “Too much. That’s the truth of it. She was too much like me.”

He carefully shifted his hold on Jenny and laid her down. He kissed her forehead again, then turned his head to look at Cobb, now a prisoner in the custody of the men he’d led.

The Doctor stood and crossed the room in an instant, scooping Cobb’s gun off the floor as he went. Some distant part of his mind was aware that Rose wasn’t trying to stop him, but he was too angry to spend much effort wondering why. The cold metal of the gun in his hand felt right as he pointed it at Cobb’s temple. It would be so easy—so easy to just pull the trigger. The humans holding Cobb obviously expected it, and even accepted that it was his right.

That thought—that he had the right to take another life—was what finally broke through his rage. The Doctor pressed his lips into a thin line, then put the safety back on the gun. Cobb blinked up at him in confusion, and the Doctor crouched down to look him in the eye.
“I never would,” he spat out. He grabbed the gun by the barrel and held it up between them. “Have you got that? I never would.” He punctuated each word by shaking the pistol in the general’s face.

Cobb still didn’t understand, and the Doctor shook his head and stood up, looking around the room at the rest of the colonists. “When you start this new world, this world of Human and Hath, remember that.” He raised his voice until he was yelling. “Make the foundation of this society a man who never would.”

Finally, he tossed the gun aside and went to Rose, choosing the comfort of her arms over the momentary relief vengeance would give him.

My Doctor, she told him as he bent down to rest his head on her shoulder. I am so proud of you, love. That speech… those words you just gave these people, they’ll never forget.

The Doctor furrowed his brows together; when Rose talked about the future like that, it meant she’d seen something in the timelines. He’d been too upset over Jenny’s death to pay attention to time at all, but now he could feel that they’d just passed a key moment in the history of Messaline. His words would form the basis of their entire society.

Cline shuffled forward, his perpetually sheepish expression still on his face. “We’re going back to the camp now.” He glanced down at Jenny’s body. “If you’d like to bring her…”

The Doctor swallowed hard when he looked down at his daughter’s peaceful body, but he managed to nod. He pulled away from Rose and carefully scooped Jenny up into his arms, pressing another kiss to her forehead as he stood up.

Hath and human alike were already filing out of the spaceship, going in one direction rather than to their separate camps. Martha had picked up his coat, and she and Donna were walking with Cline and his men, both of them looking back over their shoulders at the Doctor and Rose.

It was a short, silent walk, and when they reached the theatre that had been the human camp, the soldiers respectfully left the Doctor and Rose alone with their daughter’s body for a few minutes.

The Doctor set her down on a table, then brushed the hair out of her face. “I really thought we’d be able to travel with her,” he whispered.

He felt Rose’s consideration, then the warmth of her hand in his as she laced their fingers together. He looked up at her and was surprised to see a smile on her face. “Rose?”

“Oh, Doctor. We will. We are going to do so much travelling, and teach her all about the joys and privileges of life in the TARDIS.”

“What do you mean?” The Doctor tried not to let his hopes get up. The one time he had taken longer than this to regenerate had been a very special circumstance. He’d been left in a cold morgue overnight after having unnecessary heart surgery that left a wire in his hearts.

“Oh, she’s not going to regenerate, love,” Rose agreed. “I wouldn’t lie to you.”

“Then…”

“Look around you,” she urged.

The Doctor looked away from his bond mate and daughter and tried to see what Rose saw. It was just a theatre… nothing special.

“We just need to wait for it to work.”

Martha looked at them pityingly when they explained the need to wait a little bit longer on Messaline, and Rose knew she thought they were in denial. But Martha didn’t argue, even though she was obviously anxious to get back to London. Instead, she took Donna around to meet the Hath.

Rose leaned back against the Doctor’s chest. “Does it make you nervous, watching them together? Like, what kind of stories are they swapping?”

The Doctor snorted. “How do you think I feel when you get together with Sarah and Barbara?”

Rose shifted to look up at him. “Oh, they have the best stories,” she agreed.

The Doctor groaned dramatically, but also ran a grateful touch over the bond. They both knew she was teasing him to keep him distracted, and he appreciated it.

Just when Rose was about to ask if he’d really accidentally gotten engaged to an Aztec princess by making a cup of cocoa, they heard a slow exhalation. Rose’s heart raced when she looked at Jenny and saw the small cloud of green and gold gas hovering over her face.

She and the Doctor jumped to their feet and had just reached Jenny’s side when her blue eyes flew open. “Hello, Mum and Dad,” she said cheerfully.

The Doctor shouted joyfully and scooped her up off the table to swing her around. “Oh, you are brilliant,” he told her, squeezing her tight. “You are definitely my daughter.”

“How…” He looked up at Martha, whose mouth hung open. “But that’s impossible.” The colonists standing around her seemed to agree, judging by their wide eyes.

“Not impossible,” he corrected. “Just a little bit unlikely.”

Rose pulled Jenny away from him to give her a hug herself. “Are you ready to see new worlds?” she asked.

Jenny nodded eagerly, and the Doctor laughed. “Come on then. It’s time for us to go.”

Cline and the Hath leader inched towards them. Cline ran his hand through his shaggy hair. “How… what just happened here?”

The Doctor nodded at the window that now let sunlight stream into the room. “Cobb was right about one thing,” he said. “The Source was the breath of life.”

The other man’s brow furrowed, but it only took him a second to catch on. “The terraforming device,” he realised. “It brings life.”

“Exactly.”

He nodded once, then held out his hand to shake the Doctor’s. “We’ve cleared the path to your ship,” Cline told them.

“Thank you.” The Doctor shook his hand. “And remember what I told you. Vengeance and violence
are not what you should be building your new civilisation on.”

“We know.” Cline assured him. “We’ll do what you said, and build it in memory of the man who never would.”

It was a short walk to the TARDIS. Rose ran ahead as soon as she was in sight, pulling her key out as she ran. “Are you ready for this?” she asked Jenny as she fitted it into the lock.

Jenny looked at the blue box, then at the four other people who were waiting to step inside. “I feel like there’s a joke I’m not getting.”

Rose winked at her. “Oh, there is, but the punchline is all yours.” She pushed the door open, then moved to stand with the Doctor while Jenny took her first steps into the TARDIS.

“But… that’s…” Jenny stood on the ramp and turned in a slow circle. “She’s bigger on the inside!”

She blinked when everyone laughed at those familiar words, and Rose was the first to step forward and hug her. “Trust me, we all felt like you do the first time we stepped inside. Except maybe the Doctor, and he grew up around TARDISes, so it wasn’t a surprise to him.”

The Doctor tossed his coat over a strut and started the flight sequence. “No, but I still thought she was the most beautiful thing I’d ever seen.” He looked up at Martha. “Home, Dr. Jones?”

“Yes please, Doctor.”

“All right then. Is everyone ready?” He looked at Jenny, a broad grin on his face. “You might want to hold on tight. It can be a bumpy ride.”

“Unless Rose is driving,” Martha countered.

“Oh, I’m not the only one who’s noticed that!” Donna exclaimed.

“Anyway!” the Doctor said. “If you’re all done making fun of my driving?” They laughed at him, and he rolled his eyes. “Allons-y!”

He watched Jenny as he threw the dematerialisation lever. Her eyes widened when the time rotor started moving up and down, and she stretched across the console to press her hand to it.

“This is incredible!” she exclaimed over the grinding of the engines, and the TARDIS lights flashed in pleasure at the compliment.

The ship spun and gyrated through the Vortex, putting on a show for her newest passenger. Then they soared out of the Vortex and landed in London with a hard thud.

Jenny fell back on the grating, laughing breathlessly. “Is it like that every time?” she asked as she jumped up and brushed herself off.

“Almost,” Rose answered, chuckling at her excitement.

“Right.” Martha pointed to the door. “Well, I’ll be off… as long as you’re certain you got the date right?”

Rose pressed her lips together to hide her smile at the Doctor’s insulted expression. “We’re exactly where we should be,” she reassured Martha.

Martha looked over her shoulder at the door, and Rose thought she detected a hint of reluctance on
“Tell you what,” she said, “I’ll walk you home.”

“But you can’t leave without saying goodbye.” The Doctor held his arms out, and Martha accepted his hug. “Thanks for coming yesterday,” she mumbled into his shoulder.

He smiled at her as she stepped back. “We’re never more than a phone call away,” he reminded her. “Any time you run into trouble with petulant teenagers trying to surrender the planet to an alien force, you call us.”

Martha rolled her eyes. “Yeah, will do.” She turned to Donna. “I’m glad these two have you looking out for them, Donna.”

Donna laughed and hugged her quickly. “It’s a tough job sometimes, but I don’t mind.”

Jenny was lingering in the background, sitting on the jump seat watching everyone else say goodbye. Martha waved awkwardly at her, then turned to Rose. “Ready.”

Once the TARDIS door was closed behind them, she linked her arm through Martha’s. “Is something wrong?”

“Not wrong,” Martha hedged.

“But not right either,” Rose deduced. She remembered Martha’s hesitation when they’d talked about her boyfriend and took a shot in the dark. “Is there something wrong with Tom?”

Martha groaned, and Rose knew she’d hit the nail on the head. “Do you ever wonder… what it would be like, if you’d fallen in love with someone else while travelling with the Doctor?”

Rose couldn’t help her recoil. “Never.”

“Oh no, I just mean…” Martha took a deep breath. “Right. So, let me start at the beginning. Tom doesn’t know anything about UNIT or working with Jack, or any of the rest of it.”

“Why haven’t you said something to him?” Rose rubbed at her forehead. Even though the choice had been hers, Martha had never really been happy with keeping her life on the TARDIS a secret from her family. Keeping the truth of her life from her boyfriend didn’t seem at all like something she would do.

Martha sighed and held her arms out for a moment before dropping them. “What am I supposed to say? ‘We didn’t actually meet at a medical convention—we met on the 365th day of hell, when the Master had taken over the planet.’”

“But you’re keeping a huge part of who you are from him.” Rose shook her head; no wonder Martha wasn’t content with her relationship. It didn’t seem very fair to Tom either, really. “How can he support you in the life you lead if he doesn’t even know what it’s like?”

“I know,” Martha groaned. “And that’s why I’m asking. Because you and the Doctor… you’re partners, even before you’re romantic partners. You work together.”

“Ah.” Rose finally understood where her question was coming from. She considered for a moment, then said, “Well… I forget sometimes that this is what it’s like for most people who have a job like yours. The Doctor and I are lucky enough to work together, but most people who work in clandestine services or high-ranking military jobs can’t share their work with their partners.”

Martha sighed and shoved her hands into her coat pockets. “I know, but I want a relationship like
yours and the Doctor’s.”

Rose smiled at that comparison. “Then you have to decide what’s more important to you, having a real partner, or accepting the differences and loving him regardless,” she said simply.

Martha nodded slowly. “Yeah. I’ve been trying not to think of it like that, but you’re right. Thanks, Rose.” She smiled and tipped her head towards the TARDIS. “You should get back in there. You’ve got a whole new life to figure out.”

Rose looked at the TARDIS, where her growing family awaited her. When the ship had insisted on taking them to Messaline that morning, she hadn’t had a clue what waited for them there. But now…

She smiled at Martha. “Yeah. I do. And do you know what? It’s going to be fantastic.”

Chapter End Notes

Guys, I’m SO EXCITED about this and all the changes it brings! I think this is the biggest change to canon since fixing Doomsday. Are you ready for this?
While Rose was saying goodbye to Martha, the Doctor moved around the console, setting the coordinates for the first planet he wanted to show Jenny. He wanted to impress her on her first trip out, and it had only taken him a moment to settle on a destination.

As he adjusted the final dial, she came over and peered down at the controls. “Are we going to a new planet when Rose gets back?” she asked eagerly.

The TARDIS door opened and Rose stepped inside. The Doctor raised an eyebrow at her, and when she nodded, he grinned down at Jenny. “Who’s ready to see whole new worlds?”

“Me!” Jenny and Rose chorused, broad, toothy smiles stretching across their faces.

The Doctor glanced at Donna, and she rolled her eyes. “Oh, go on then Spaceman. Just try not to land us in the middle of a civil war this time.”

“Oh! That wasn’t my fault—the TARDIS took us there so we could meet Jenny.” He rocked back on his heels and considered that. “Of course, if she hadn’t taken us there, Jenny wouldn’t have been created… bit of a paradox, that is.”

“And doesn’t that just describe your entire life?” Donna snarked.

He winked. “And you love it,” he challenged, pleased when she didn’t deny it. He beckoned for Rose to join him. “What do you think of my chosen destination?”

She looked down at the controls. “Oh, absolutely,” she agreed. “I’ve always wanted to go back.”

Jenny was bouncing on her toes on his other side, and he pointed at the dematerialisation lever. “I think you should have the honour,” he told her.

Her eyes widened. “Do you mean it?” she asked, already reaching for the lever.

“Oh, yes.”

She grinned and grabbed the lever firmly before shoving it into the on position. The time rotor started its slow up-and-down chug as the TARDIS took them through the Vortex to a very special planet.

When they landed and Jenny would have gone rushing out the door, he stopped her with a hand on her shoulder. “You’ll want to put a coat on,” he told her, pointing to the rack by the door. There was a bright blue ski jacket waiting for her, alongside the coats Rose and Donna had worn on the Ood Sphere.

Once everyone was suited up, he nodded to Jenny to open the door. Her gasp of amazement when she stepped out into the twilight was gratifying. “Where are we, Dad?”

The word still sent a strange twinge through his hearts, but he was getting used to it. Rose took his hand and squeezed, and he brought her hand to his lips and pressed a kiss to it.

“This is called Woman Wept,” he told Jenny and Donna as they turned in slow circles, taking in the majestic sight of the frozen sea, waves captured forever in their peaks and troughs.

“What happened here?” Donna asked. “I mean, I’ve heard of an ice age, but that happens too slowly for this.”
“It was a cataclysmic disaster,” Rose explained. “The sun went out in a single moment, freezing the sea in an instant.”

Jenny reached out and touched one of the icy waves. “It’s beautiful,” she breathed.

Donna found a smooth patch of ice and skated in a small circle. “Oh, I love this,” she admitted. “Not that it isn’t satisfying, stopping civil wars and overturning corrupt governments. But this is what I imagined all those months when I wished I’d gone with you.”

She waved to Jenny. “Come on, don’t just stand there. Try it!”

Jenny took a tentative step onto the ice, and her foot nearly slid out from under her. Donna skated over with her hand out, and Jenny gamely took it, letting her lead her onto the ice.

“Lean forward as you push off,” Donna instructed. “That’s how you stay upright.”

Jenny’s boots weren’t the best suited for ice skating, but the surface of Woman Wept was slick enough to make it work. After a few false starts, she felt confident enough to let go of Donna’s hand, and they were skating a winding path around the waves.

The Doctor and Rose came up alongside them. “Well, what do you think, Jenny?” the Doctor asked. “Whole new worlds? Is it everything you imagined?”

Jenny laughed, the sparkle in her eyes matching her pink cheeks. “Oh, yes,” she said breathlessly.

Donna shook her head. “Oh, that’s just wizard,” she groaned. “Now there are three of you who sound alike.”

“Yes!” the Doctor said, popping the p. “The Doctor, Rose Tyler, and Jenny.”

Jenny tipped her head back and narrowed her eyes. “Do you have a family name, Dad? The humans born out of the machines on Messaline didn’t, but I know they did before they came in the rocket. Is that how we do it?”

The Doctor grimaced. “Time Lord naming conventions are… complicated. Not to mention, I’m the last of my family, and I hadn’t gotten along with them for centuries anyway.”

Rose got his attention over the bond, and when he looked at her, she said, *She can use mine, if it’s all right with you.*

He smiled at her, then nodded from Jenny to Rose. “When I need a last name, I use Tyler. That’s Rose’s last name.”

Jenny looked eagerly at Rose. “Would that be all right with you, Rose?”

“Yeah, of course,” Rose said easily. “A family name is just one way to say, ‘These people belong together,’ and we definitely belong together.”

Jenny’s dimples deepened as her smile widened, and she skated forward to throw her arms around Rose. “Thank y- Ohhh!” she squealed as her feet slid on the slick ice.

Rose grabbed Jenny’s coat as her arms flailed, trying to regain her balance. After a moment, her feet stopped sliding, and she carefully straightened up.

“All right there?” Rose asked.
Jenny chuckled ruefully. “Yep. I guess I should be more careful, though.”

Donna skated over to them. “Well, even if you fall, what’s the worst that could happen?” She pointed at the ice. “It’s not like this is going to break. So you’d have a bruised bum and a sore ego… or is that the other way around?” She pointed to pattern of waves crashing into each other about ten feet away. “Come on. Let’s look around some more.”

Jenny glanced at the Doctor and Rose over her shoulder before clomping carefully across the ice with Donna.

The wind whistled through the waves as they walked off, and Rose moved closer to the Doctor, taking shelter in his taller frame. He pulled her close and wrapped his arms around her waist, and she leaned her head back against his chest when he rested his chin on her shoulder.

“Remember the first time we came here?” she murmured, reaching for his hand and lacing their fingers together. “Right after my dad died?”

The Doctor nodded, scraping his stubbled jaw against her cheek. They stood in silence for a long moment as the perpetual twilight cast long shadows over the surface of the planet. A few stars twinkled above, but there was no sun. That star had been wiped out of existence during the last days of the Time War, leaving Woman Wept a rogue planet, captured forever in the moment of its orphanage.

When Rose closed her eyes, she could still hear the Doctor’s voice as he told her the story, his Northern accent getting stronger with his distress. The memory made her heart ache, and she turned in his arms and slid her hands up to link them behind his neck.

“I wished so much that I could do something to make you feel better. I’d been feeling so guilty over my mistake, and you brought me here to put it in perspective. And I—”

“Did what you always do,” the Doctor interrupted. He rested his hands on her hips, though Rose could hardly feel them through the thick wool of her peacoat. “You pointed out the beauty, when I had been focused on the darkness.”

Rose tilted her head, considering that. Her words at the time hadn’t seemed like much, but the Doctor was right—that day had started a pattern they still played out.

The Doctor smiled and pulled her closer. “I was already in love with you,” he told her, his voice low and intimate. “But that was the day I realised I really didn’t know how I’d live without you.”

Rose ran her hands through his hair and let her gaze drift to his lips before meeting his eyes again. “Good thing you’ll never have to find out,” she breathed, just before his lips touched hers.

Donna didn’t want to interrupt the Doctor and Rose’s private moment, especially not when she turned around and they were wrapped in each other’s arms, kissing. She rolled her eyes and ducked around the next wave with Jenny, determined to keep exploring a little longer.

However, the cold of Woman Wept slowly worked its way through her heavy parka. Eventually, she felt shivers run down her back and knew it was time to get back inside. And even though Jenny didn’t seem fazed by it, her nose had turned bright red.

“Come on, Jenny,” she said briskly. “I think it’s time for dinner and hot toddies by a roaring fire.”
Jenny’s stomach growled, making them both laugh. “Yeah, all right. Let’s find Dad and Rose.”

“They’re this way,” Donna said, pointing at the thankfully no-longer-kissing couple. She and Jenny crossed half the distance between them, then Donna whistled sharply, getting their attention. “Oi, Doctor!” She jerked her thumb towards the TARDIS. “Time to go inside, I think.”

“That’s probably a good idea,” Rose agreed. “Besides, we need to show Jenny around the TARDIS still.”

When they stomped through the TARDIS doors a few minutes later, the ship had considerately raised the temperature in the console room. Donna sighed in relief when the warmth seeped into her bones, but Jenny looked around curiously.

“Is it just me, or is it warmer in here than it was before? Did you turn up the heat before we left, Dad?”

The Doctor shook his head as he draped his coat over a strut. “No, she did that on her own.” He pressed a series of buttons, then threw the dematerialisation lever. Donna held on while she felt the now-familiar shift into the Vortex. “The TARDIS, she’s a little bit…” He tugged on his ear. “Well, she’s sentient.”

Jenny blinked a few times, then she said, “Is she… I thought I was just imagining things, but is she in my head, too?”

Rose grinned and leaned back on the console. “Yep!” she said. “We’ll teach you more about how to communicate with her later, though.”

“I can’t believe this all sounds completely normal to me,” Donna muttered. “Sentient, telepathic spaceships that are bigger on the inside and can go anywhere in time and space… this is my life now.” She shook her head. “But moving on to more pressing matters, I am famished. I haven’t eaten since I had breakfast with Gramps this morning, and that was only a cup of coffee and a pastry.”

The Doctor gestured to the corridor behind her. “Well then, lead the way, Donna Noble.”

After dinner, Jenny finally got the promised tour. The Doctor loved seeing the excitement grow on his daughter’s face as she realised exactly what the TARDIS was and what she could do.

By the time they reached the room the ship had created for her, Jenny’s eyes were glowing. “This one is mine?” she asked, her hand on the brushed nickel handle.

“It’s yours,” the Doctor confirmed.

She bit her lip, but a squeak of excitement still escaped her when she stepped into her room for the first time. The Doctor shook his head; the TARDIS had replicated a captain’s cabin from an old sailing ship—ideal for a born explorer like Jenny.

The bed was built into the wall on the left side of the room, with drawers that pulled out beneath the bed frame. Bookshelves ran along the opposite wall, filled with books about travel and the various alien species they might meet. She’d turned the far wall into fake windows, matching the large windows most captains had, giving them a view of the sea. Jenny’s windows currently showed the stars as they had appeared from Gallifrey—a none-too-subtle reminder to the Doctor that he still needed to explain some of her heritage to her.
Jenny stood next to the desk in the middle of the room and turned in a circle. “I love it!” She reached for the globe on the desk and made it spin, then laughed in delight. “It’s perfect.” She skipped back over to them and hugged him tight. “Thank you!”

The Doctor laughed. “Don’t thank me, thank the TARDIS.”

“Oh!” Jenny stepped back and looked up at the ceiling. “Thank you!” The lights flashed in response.

“So, if the tour is over,” Donna said, “why don’t we go sit in the library for a bit? Fireplace, hot toddies, comfy chairs to sit in while we talk…”

“Sounds good to me,” Rose said. “It’s been a long day—a relaxing evening would be nice.”

Despite the evening plans being Donna’s idea, the Doctor was unsurprised an hour later when she was the first to turn in. As Rose had said, it had been a long day. Two long days in a row, actually.

Jenny looked at Rose and the Doctor after she left. “How come I’m not tired at all?” she asked. “The bed in my room is nicer than anything the soldiers had on Messaline, but I feel like I could go for another three or four hours before I need to lie down.”

The Doctor chuckled. “You’re not human,” he reminded his daughter. “If you want to know what to expect of your body, don’t compare yourself to Donna.”

A furrow appeared on her forehead. “So Time Lords didn’t need to sleep as much.”

“Correct.”

“Can you tell me anything else?” She glanced between the Doctor and Rose. “Rose told me you’d explain more about why I can feel you in my head.”

The TARDIS hummed before the Doctor could say anything, and he pursed his lips as he considered her suggestion. “Why don’t you come with me?” he said after a moment, putting his glass down and standing up.

Jenny jumped to her feet, and after a quizzical look and a nod in reply, Rose stood up, too. The Doctor led them out of the library, to the door directly across the hall.

He paused before opening it and looked over at Jenny. “One thing we should have explained earlier. Because she’s sentient, she can move things around if she wants, or if they’re needed. This room isn’t normally here. Actually, it’s not usually any place where anyone but me or Rose could find it. But today it’s here, because it’s convenient.”

Jenny stared at the door, her brow drawn up with heavy creases. “All right… I think I understand that.”

The Doctor nodded. Then, unable to help himself, he shifted his attention to Rose as he pushed the door open. Her eyes lit up when she registered the tall, red grass and the rolling hills, and he could remember the moment he’d first seen her in her wedding dress as if it had been yesterday.

*My Fortuna*, he told her again, taking her hand as they stepped through the doorway into the sunny room.

“This is amazing!” Jenny breathed.

The Doctor blinked; he’d almost forgotten he and Rose weren’t alone.
Jenny reached down and ran her fingers through the red grass. “The TARDIS can make it be outdoors, too?” she asked.

“She’s living, so creating a room with organic material is really fairly simple,” the Doctor explained. “There’s a garden room as well, and probably a few others that have growing things in them.”

He gestured broadly at the hills and the mountains rising in the background. “But this room… this is representation of Gallifrey.”

“Gallifrey,” Jenny repeated. “That’s the name of your world?”

The Doctor looked over the hills covered in red grass to the silver ulanda trees, swaying and chiming gently in the breeze. “Yes. This is where I’m from.”

“If you’re from Gallifrey, why don’t you call yourself a Gallifreyan instead of a Time Lord?”

The Doctor grimaced; there were several ways he could answer that question. “Time Lord is my title,” he finally said, choosing to leave out the confusing part about it also being a sub-species of Gallifreyan. “My species is technically Gallifreyan.”

Jenny’s eyes widened and she looked back and forth between the Doctor and Rose. “And that’s how Rose can be a Time Lord when you said you’re the last one,” she guessed. “Because somehow, she has that title even though she’s biologically a different species.”

The Doctor and Rose both nodded. “That’s right,” Rose said. “It really is a long story, or I’d explain it all right now, but that’s the basics of what happened.”

Jenny chewed on her lip. “So am I a Time Lord, or Gallifreyan?”

The Doctor sighed. “That’s very hard to tell,” he said. “But given a few things, I suspect you’re Gallifreyan.”

A breeze swept up the hill, turning the grass into crimson waves. Above them, the twin suns shone in the burnt orange sky, and down in the valley, the river Lethe flowed between the hills.

It was a surreal experience, to be standing on a planet that had been gone for years, explaining the heritage he’d never felt a part of to the daughter he’d never imagined he would have.

The Doctor could feel Jenny’s curiosity, and he waited for her next question. It wasn’t long in coming.

“So… telepathy is a Gallifreyan ability, then?”

“Yes, it is—and before you ask the next question I see on your face, the way Rose became a Time Lord made her telepathic as well.”

“And it made me the better driver,” Rose teased, nudging him in the ribs.

Jenny was too fixated on her questions to join in the teasing. She nodded once, then focused her gaze on the Doctor. “So could everyone feel each other like this, or is it because you’re my dad?”

The Doctor felt a glimmer of pride at the logical questions Jenny kept coming up with. “First, tell me what you’re picking up from us,” he requested.

Jenny closed her eyes, and a moment later, the Doctor felt her mind reach out to him along the very basic connection that existed between blood relations. His bond with Rose allowed Jenny to connect
with her as well, and finally, he felt her prod at the TARDIS’ telepathic presence. After a moment, her eyes opened, and she shrugged. “Mostly I feel that you’re there, like I can see you now. Earlier, on Messaline, I was picking up some emotions, too.”

“Good. That’s good.” The Doctor smiled. “All Gallifreyans were aware of each other telepathically, but the way you’re picking up on strong emotions from us—that’s because we’re family.” He pressed his tongue to the back of his teeth. “Since you’re telepathic, we really ought to teach you how to put mental barriers up to prevent anyone from attacking your mind.”

Rose turned to him, a tiny crease in the middle of her forehead. “Will barriers work between the three of us?” she asked.

The Doctor nodded. “Yep!” Jenny was frowning at them in confusion, and he sighed, trying to think of a way to explain. “Telepathic barriers allow you to keep things private,” he said finally. “Basically, they keep anyone from eavesdropping on your thoughts or emotions.”

They reached the top of the hill they’d been climbing, and in the distance, they could see the Citadel, the spires stretching up to the top of the glass dome. “Telepathy was important to Time Lords too,” he added. “It helped us detect and recognise one another, even if we had regenerated.”

Jenny’s brows knit together, and he recognised his mistake before she could ask. “Ah. Right. Regeneration.” He tugged on his ear. Regeneration wasn’t something typically discussed outside of Gallifrey, and he still struggled with that cultural taboo.

Thankfully, Rose was there to come to his rescue. “When Time Lords are mortally wounded, instead of dying, their bodies reform on a cellular level. They don’t look anything alike on the outside, but in their mind and hearts, they’re still the same person.”

Jenny shoved her hands into her pockets. “And that’s why you think I’m a Gallifreyan and not a Time Lord,” she said slowly. “Because I didn’t regenerate when I died.”

The Doctor flinched at Jenny’s bald mention of her death, and for a moment, he was back in the rocket, holding her lifeless body. Before he could get lost in the memory, he felt Rose’s hand on his arm, tethering him in the present. He looked down into her sympathetic eyes and realised for the first time that if she hadn’t been with them on Messaline, he would have left Jenny behind, thinking she was dead.

He swallowed hard and turned back to Jenny and the question he’d left unanswered. “That’s one reason,” he agreed. “But really, you’re better off not being a Time Lord.” He pointed to the Citadel. “Here, I’ll tell you about them, and you’ll understand.”

They sat down in the soft grass and looked across the plain at the domed city rising in the distance as the Doctor told them about the Time Lords—about their determination not to get involved in the destiny of other people, and how one arrogant moment had led to the start of the Time War.

He talked about his own past, too—the people he’d known, both good and bad. Jenny listened with rapt fascination, and her genuine interest pulled stories from the Doctor that he hadn’t thought of in centuries.

When Rose yawned and leaned into him, the Doctor suddenly realised they’d been talking for nearly four hours. “That’s probably enough for now,” he told Jenny. “We can talk more about this later, but between what I’ve already told you and the books I know you have in your room, you’ve got more than enough to work through.”
Jenny sighed, but she got to her feet and brushed off her jeans. “There’s so much to know,” she said.

The Doctor nudged Rose gently, and she blinked up at him, then nodded and let him pull her to her feet. Once they were walking towards the door, he replied to Jenny’s comment.

“There is,” he agreed. “But you don’t have to learn it all today, or even in the next month. You’ve got time, Jenny.”

She nodded, then stopped short when they drew near to the door. The Doctor smiled slightly, knowing what was going through her head. “It looks strange, doesn’t it? Like a door standing in the middle of a meadow.”

Jenny reached for it tentatively, then shook her head when it swung open, revealing the corridor on the other side. “I am going to love living here,” she proclaimed.

The Doctor laughed, but Rose’s chuckle sounded sleepy. He looked down at her, then suggested, “Why don’t you go get ready for bed, love? I’ll show Jenny the way to her room, and then I’ll be right there.”

Rose yawned again, then reached up to kiss his cheek. “All righ’,” she said, then started down the corridor toward their own room.

She’d woken up a little by the time she reached it, enough to hang her clothes up properly and brush her teeth and wash her face instead of tumbling straight into bed. The Doctor came in while she was putting her pyjamas on. His tie was already loose around his neck, and he didn’t waste any time changing for bed.

Rose crawled into bed and waited for him to join her. “Do you think Jenny liked her first trip?” the Doctor asked as he hung his suit up.

She smiled at him. “I think she loved it,” she assured him. “It was very impressive, just like you.” The words triggered a memory, and she pressed her tongue to the back of her teeth while she waited for it to resurface. “Oh! You were going to tell me about the TARDIS purposely skipping that year.”

He turned down the covers on his side of the bed, then lay down on his side. Rose rolled over so they were facing each other, and watched in fascination as a blush spread over his face, going all the way up to the tips of his ears.

“So… it’s possible she misinterpreted something I said,” he confessed.

Rose reached for his hand. “Oh?” she prodded as she laced their fingers together.

“Well…” He brushed his thumb over hers. “Remember, you’d only been travelling with me for two weeks when you asked if you could go back and visit. And you hadn’t been sure about coming with me in the first place. I might have been concerned you would get home and remember all the reasons travelling was a bad idea and decide to stay in London.”

Rose felt her brows furrow together. The fear itself wasn’t news—he’d mentioned that before. But how did it connect to the TARDIS…?

“Oh,” she said when the pieces clicked into place. “So you asked the TARDIS to land on a day when I wouldn’t be tempted to stay behind. An’ she decided to land so far in the future that it would have been almost impossible for me to go back to my old life.”

The Doctor’s freckles stood out against his pink cheeks. “Something like that,” he mumbled. “If I’d
Rose scooted forward and pressed a kiss to his lips, then pulled back and smiled at him. “I don’t mind, Doctor,” she assured him. “I never minded missing that year, except for feeling guilty about how worried Mum and Mickey were.”

The Doctor waited, and when the expected wave of longing hit Rose, he pulled her close and offered as much comfort as he could over the bond. Her breath hitched when his hand moved automatically to slowly stroke her hair.

*I’m sorry,* he told her, pulling her closer into the comfort of the bond.

*Do you think I’ll ever see her again?*

For once, the Doctor didn’t have an automatic answer. Finally, he sighed. *A year ago, I would have said no. A week ago even. But I also would have laughed if anyone had told me I would have a daughter, progenated from a machine. So the truth is, love, I don’t know. The impossible has a way of happening, it seems.*

Rose nuzzled into his chest. *We do six impossible things before breakfast, right?*

He chuckled. *We do, but only if we get enough sleep. You’re exhausted, Rose. Get some rest.* He kept his hand moving in her hair, and a few minutes later, he felt her breathing deepen.

The Doctor sighed and settled into one of his favourite times of the day. Holding Rose while she slept in his arms was a privilege he would never take for granted.

And after today, he had even more to cherish. The group of friends travelling with them had slowly been transitioning into a unique sort of an extended family, and having his daughter on board with them made that concept a reality.

The Doctor’s time senses hummed, and his hand stilled as he tried to pin down what was coming. The rough current of time that had carried them to Messaline had smoothed out when Jenny stepped into the TARDIS, but as he had considered their family, he’d sensed an eddy in the waters, just out of sight.

Somehow, he had a feeling Jenny would not be the only surprise family Time gave them.

*oOoOoOoOo*

“Where are we going today?” Jenny asked the next morning when they gathered in the console room after breakfast.

Her father rocked back on his heels, a smirk on his face. “Well,” he drawled, “we could punch in a destination like we did yesterday, or…”

Jenny waited breathlessly for him to finish the sentence, but after a moment, Rose rolled her eyes and nudged him in the side with her elbow. “Just tell her what you’re thinking,” she chided.

A silly grin crossed his face. “Well, the TARDIS has a randomiser button. We can just hit the button, and she’ll decide where to take us today.”

The third presence in Jenny’s mind hummed happily, and Jenny had a feeling the ship would interfere with their plans, even if they set the coordinates. “All right then,” she agreed. “Let her take us someplace.”
Donna looked at the three of them. “You’re all mad,” she declared. “Time Lords must all be mad. Who else would be so excited to just… jump on a plane without any clue of where you were going?”

Rose slid up next to her and nudged her with her elbow. “Oh, come on, Donna—that’s half the fun! Not knowing where we’ll end up… knowing it could be anywhere in time and space…”

Donna rolled her eyes, but Jenny saw her lips curve up in a smile, confirming that Donna’s comments about the travelling were just her way of teasing.

The Doctor flipped the lever, and the TARDIS chugged her way through the Vortex, landing softly this time. “Jenny?” he said, pointing to the door.

Jenny looked at the door, then back at him. “Do I need a coat this time?”

Her father swung his own brown coat around his shoulders and straightened the lapels. “I have no idea. Why don’t you find out?”

Jenny grinned at him, then skipped to the door, opening it and slipping outside before anyone else was quite ready to leave.

The Doctor was just about to reach for Rose’s hand and offer a cheerful, “Allons-y!” when he felt a sudden wave of uncertainty from Jenny.

“Time to go,” Rose agreed, sensing the same thing. They jogged down the ramp and out the door, trusting Donna to close the door behind them.

Jenny was only a few feet away from the TARDIS, but they’d apparently landed in the middle of a busy town square. Unsurprisingly, that had attracted the attention of the locals, and she was surrounded by a group of grey-skinned aliens, loudly demanding to know where she’d come from.

The Doctor swept into the middle of the group, carefully positioning himself between the largest of the aliens and Jenny. “Hello!” he said brightly. “I’m the Doctor. This is my wife Rose, our friend Donna, and I see you’ve already met my daughter, Jenny.”

It was only when he felt Jenny’s bright happiness that he realised he’d just introduced her as his daughter. The full introduction had rattled off his tongue so naturally that he hadn’t even thought about it.

He shot her a quick smile, then rocked back on his heels and stared the leader down. “Now, what seems to be the problem?”
Over the next month, the Doctor initiated Jenny into life in the TARDIS. They let the ship take them where she wanted, and she gave them exactly what Jenny had wanted: whole new worlds, civilisations saved, and an awful lot of running.

Today, Jenny watched eagerly as the Doctor slowly circled the TARDIS console, setting the parameters of the randomiser. While it could be left open to all of space and time, it was also possible to narrow the possibilities.

*No to war and natural disaster,* he thought, turning those dials all the way off. A few days ago, they’d landed in the middle of a wildfire and had spent hours relocating the population. He still felt like he could smell smoke, even though he knew it was his imagination.

*Mutter’s Spiral, alpha quadrant*… He glanced at Rose and Donna, sitting on the jump seat finishing their tea. *And within a hundred years of Rose and Donna’s time.*

He reached for the dematerialisation lever, and all three ladies grabbed onto the railing. The Doctor threw the lever, then laughed as the TARDIS rocked into motion, taking them through time and space.

“Where are we going?” Jenny yelled over the grinding sound of the engines.

“Not a clue,” the Doctor replied. “Someplace fun, I hope!”

When the ship landed, he was the first one down the ramp and out the door. The TARDIS was parked beside a thick stone wall, and he took a deep breath of the fresh air as he stepped through the opening in the wall into the warm sunshine.

“Oh, smell that air,” the Doctor said to Rose, Donna, and Jenny as they followed him outside. “Grass and lemonade. And a little bit of mint. A hint of mint. Must be the nineteen-twenties.”

Jenny looked up at him, her mouth hanging open. “You can tell what year it is just by smelling?”

The Doctor nodded sagely. “Oh, yeah.”

Rose scolded him telepathically for the fib, but Donna wasn’t nearly so subtle. She rolled her eyes and pointed to the gate just twenty yards away.

“Or maybe that big vintage car coming up the drive gave it away,” she said drolly.

The large touring automobile definitely suggested a time period, and the four of them watched as it rolled past them. “You never know.” The Doctor tugged on his ear. “Maybe I can smell it, too.”

Donna rolled her eyes. “Come on, Jenny,” she said, linking her arm through the younger woman’s. “Let’s leave your father and his superior nose back here while we go get a closer look at where we’ve landed.”

Jenny barely spared the Doctor and Rose a glance over her shoulder as she and Donna hurried along the drive to the large Tudor manor.

Rose took the Doctor’s arm and they followed at a more leisurely pace. “Why didn’t you mention time senses to Jenny?” she asked.
The Doctor looked down at her, a furrow between his brows. “I don’t know if she’ll have time senses,” he explained. “She’s like me in a lot of ways, but she didn’t regenerate. She’s never been near the Untempered Schism or looked into the Time Vortex.” He sighed and looked ahead to where Jenny and Donna were hiding behind a corner of the building, watching the goings-on in front of the house. “She’s so excited to be like me. I didn’t want to explain just yet that there’s one more way she might not be.”

Rose stared at him, taking in the worry lines around his eyes as he considered ways to explain something to his daughter that might disappoint her. Emotions welled up in her heart, and she shifted closer to the Doctor and ran her free hand over his arm.

*I really love you,* she told him as they joined Donna and Jenny.

In answer, the Doctor gently tugged his arm free and wrapped it around her shoulders. He pulled her close and pressed a kiss to her temple, then smiled at Jenny and Donna. “So, what have we missed?” he asked as a young vicar rode up on his bicycle, joining the butler and another man on the front steps of the manor.

Donna smirked. “The butler is Greeves, and that bloke is Professor Peach. It’s like something out of a murder mystery!”

Greeves nodded at the newly-arrived vicar. “Reverend Golightly. Lady Eddison requests you make yourselves comfortable in your rooms. Cocktails will be served on the lawn from half past four.”

“You go on up,” Professor Peach told the reverend. “I need to check something in the library.”

“Oh?” the vicar asked.

The professor shook his head slightly. “ Alone.”

“It’s supposed to be a party,” the vicar chided mildly. “All this work will be the death of you.” The two men smiled at each other as they entered the house.

“Never mind Planet Zog,” Donna said. “A party in the nineteen-twenties—that’s more like it.”

The Doctor nodded. “The trouble is, we haven’t been invited. Oh, I forgot.” He pulled out the psychic paper and waved it in front of Donna and Jenny. “Yes, we have.” He tucked it back in his pocket, then wiggled his eyebrows in a cheeky smile and whirled around to go back to the TARDIS.

“What was that thing Dad just showed us?” Jenny asked.

“It’s called psychic paper,” Rose explained as they walked back to the TARDIS to change into period clothes. She pulled her own out and showed Jenny. “See, it’s just a blank sheet of paper, but we can make it say whatever we want—whatever will make the people looking at it listen to us.”

Jenny nodded. “So Dad will show them that paper, and they’ll think it’s an invitation to the party?”

The Doctor unlocked the TARDIS and held the door open. “Exactly!”

She looked into the ship, then back at the estate before frowning at them. “And… why did we come back here?”

Rose grinned. “A party in the nineteen-twenties means we get to dress up,” she explained. “Come on!”
Donna and Jenny followed her down the corridor, up the stairs, and past the bins. Rose paused in front of the door to the wardrobe room and waited to push it open until they were right behind her.

A broad grin spread across her face at their matching gasps of amazement. “Welcome to the Wardrobe Room,” she said, waving expansively at the three storey room. “You can come back later and poke around, but for now, I think we’ll find what we’re looking for over here.”

The TARDIS had set out a rack of dresses circa the mid nineteen-twenties. “Choose one you like,” Rose said, already examining the options. “Not one of the fancier ones though—we’ll save those to change into for dinner.”

“Oh, this is brilliant!” Donna said. “I’ve always wanted to be a flapper.”

“What’s a flapper?” Jenny asked.

“A bold young woman of the nineteen-twenties.” Rose pulled out a dress with a handkerchief hemline that would fall just past her knees. The colour was an unusual lilac ombre, and she instantly fell in love with it.

The TARDIS had provided three changing rooms, complete with a vanity and mirror. Rose slipped into the first and changed into the dress, then quickly did her hair so it fell around her shoulders in loose waves.

By the time Rose had put on the matching lilac flats and tucked her sonic screwdriver and psychic paper in the waiting purse, Donna and Jenny were already dressed and laughing over some joke, waiting for her on the chaise lounge. The copper bead work on Donna’s dress set off her red hair beautifully, and Jenny had chosen a simple dress in robin’s egg blue that made her look like the innocent she was.

They stood up when she joined them. “Come on, Rose!” Jenny danced eagerly towards the door. “We’ve been in here for twenty-five minutes, and Dad’s getting impatient.”

Rose nodded—she could almost taste the Doctor’s impatience. Then she realised what Jenny had just said, and she stopped in the doorway. “You can tell exactly how much time has passed?”

Jenny nodded. “Shouldn’t I be able to?” she asked. “I figured that was part of why we’re called Time Lords, so I didn’t even mention it.”

Rose laughed and linked her arms with her and Donna. “You were absolutely right,” she assured Jenny. “The Doctor didn’t know if you’d have time senses, though.”

She shook her head and chuckled to herself. No need to worry about Jenny being disappointed not to have time senses, love, she told him as they walked down the corridor. She just told me how long we’d kept you waiting, to the minute. The Doctor’s mind eased into relaxed excitement, and she could tell he was looking forward to teaching Jenny how to use her time senses.

“What’s Dad going to wear?” Jenny asked as they walked back to the console room. She blinked when Rose and Donna both laughed.

Donna snorted. “Your dad wears the same thing every day.” She fixed a pointed gaze on Rose, daring her to disagree. “Having the same suit in two colours doesn’t count.”

Rose shrugged; she couldn’t argue with that, especially not when he’d only worn the brown suit for more than a year. “Well, he wears a tux sometimes, if it’s necessary.” She bit her lip. “He looks really, really good in a tux,” she added.
Donna rolled her eyes. “Yeah, maybe. If your taste runs to blokes skinny enough to give you a paper cut.” She shook her head when Rose started to protest. “You can’t tell me he isn’t ridiculously skinny. And I don’t want to hear about what those suits might be hiding.”

Rose’s cheeks turned red, and Donna grinned at her. “Yeah, that’s what I thought.”

The Doctor pounded on the door as they reached the console room. “We’ll be late for cocktails,” he shouted through the door.

The three women laughed, then Donna darted forward to block the doorway. “Now. Here’s how we’re going to do this. Once he sees you, Rose, he won’t even notice how lovely Jenny and I look. So we’re going out first, and then you can follow after a moment.”

Rose gaped at her, and that gave Donna the second she needed to step out of the TARDIS, arm-in-arm with Jenny. She didn’t miss the way the Doctor’s gaze slid past her, but she shut the door before he saw Rose.

Donna struck a pose, and Jenny imitated her, putting her hand on her hip. “What do you think?” Donna asked the Doctor. “Flapper or slapper?”

He blinked a few times, and she tensed, waiting for a teasing comment. But instead, a genuine smile spread across his face as he looked at her and Jenny. “Flappers. You both look lovely.”

Donna curtsied. “Thank you,” she said, putting on a posh voice.

The Doctor nodded, but his gaze drifted to the closed door behind her. Donna rolled her eyes, then spun around and rapped once on the door. She pulled Jenny out of the way before it opened. “Watch this,” she told the young woman.

The TARDIS door swung open. Donna and Jenny couldn’t see Rose from where they were, but watching the Doctor’s face, it was obvious when he first saw her. His eyes widened, alight with love and adoration as he stepped towards her.

Rose’s hand appeared first, and he took it and brushed a kiss over her knuckles. Then she stepped out into the sunlight and smiled up at him. The Doctor let go of her hand and pushed a curl back over her ear before leaning down to kiss her gently.

“Oh!” Jenny whispered. “I can feel that.”

“That is just weird,” Donna moaned. “All of you, absolutely mad.”

Jenny shook her head. “No, I just mean… they’re happy. Really, properly happy.”

“Happy is one word for it,” Donna muttered, but she couldn’t hide her own smile. She teased them about it, but watching the Doctor and Rose together gave her hope of finding love one day.

And yet… she thought when the Doctor wrapped an arm around Rose’s waist and pulled her close. “Oi!” she called out, getting the attention of the kissing couple. “If you’re done necking, I thought we were supposed to gather on the lawn for cocktails.”

“We were just… We weren’t necking,” the Doctor protested, and the tips of his ears turned red. Rose took his hand, and he sighed. “But yes, we need to make our way to the lawn.”

The Doctor cleared his throat as they approached the house. “There’s one thing we haven’t talked about,” he said, keeping his voice low. “I think it would draw the least amount of notice if we
introduced Jenny as our daughter, Rose, instead of just mine. Certainly, it requires the least amount of explanation if we’re married and she’s ours.”

Rose nodded. “I was thinking the same thing. Then we won’t get any questions about what happened to her mum.”

Jenny looked at them both, biting her lip in anticipation. “So you’re Mum and Dad today?” she asked.

“Yep,” the Doctor confirmed as they rounded the corner of the house, following the sounds of tinny music floating from a gramophone.

“And I can be your family friend, travelling with you,” Donna offered, just before a servant dressed in black approached them.

The Doctor threw up a hand in greeting. “Good afternoon.”

The servant bowed slightly. “Drinks, sir? Ma’ams?”

“Sidecar, please,” Donna said, while Rose requested a hanky panky.

“And a lime and soda for Jenny and myself,” the Doctor added. So far, Jenny had been unimpressed by every cocktail she’d tried, and he doubted she could get ale or cider in the middle of an English garden party. The footman nodded and walked away.

The Doctor pointed to the tables that had been set up in the shade of ancient trees. He was about to suggest they sit down, but another voice interrupted him.

“May I announce, Lady Clemency Eddison.”

The Doctor turned around when he heard Greeves’ voice and watched the butler cross the lawn, followed by a petite woman about sixty years old. He put on his most charming smile, then held his hands out and said, “Lady Eddison.”

The woman took his hand, but her narrowed eyes and thin lips suggested his effusive greeting hadn’t fooled her. “Forgive me, but who exactly might you be, and what are you doing here?”

“I’m the Doctor,” he said, with just a hint of affront that she could have forgotten. He pointed at the women as he named them. “My wife Rose Tyler, our daughter Jenny, and our dear friend Miss Donna Noble, of the Chiswick Nobles.”

Lady Eddison’s narrowed gaze landed on Rose and Jenny, and the Doctor knew what she was going to say before she opened her mouth. “You can’t possibly be old enough to be this young woman’s mother, Mrs. Tyler.”

Rose smiled. “Trust me, my lady, I’m older than I look. My physician makes a special tonic that I’ve taken every day since I met him.”

The Doctor coughed to hide his amusement at her clever word play. Then he held up the psychic paper to eliminate any further questions. “We were thrilled to receive your invitation, my lady. We met at the Ambassador’s reception,” he added, only stumbling slightly over the quickly concocted meeting.

The lines around Lady Eddison’s mouth eased. “Doctor, how could I forget you?” She moved towards a servant and took a drink from the tray he was holding. “But one must be sure with the
Unicorn on the loose.”


“The Unicorn, love,” Rose corrected. “Which sounds like the name of a highwayman in a Regency romance.”

“He’s a jewel thief, actually,” Lady Eddison said. “Nobody knows who he is. He’s just struck again—snatched Lady Babbington’s pearls right from under her nose.”

She drifted away from them when a younger footman appeared with their prepared drinks. “Thank you,” Rose said as they each took the glass meant for them.

After he bowed and walked off with his empty tray, Jenny turned to them. “A jewel thief? Is that why we’re here, Dad?”

The Doctor considered as he took a sip of his water. “Possibly,” he allowed. “Though if we are, whatever they’re going to steal must be important.”

“May I announce Colonel Hugh Curbishley, the Honourable Roger Curbishley.”

At Greeves’ announcement, they turned around to watch a young man push an older gentleman in a wheelchair onto the lawn. Lady Eddison smiled at both of them. “My husband, and my son.”

“Forgive me for not rising,” the colonel said, patting his legs. “Never been the same ever since that flu epidemic back in eighteen.”

“My word,” Roger said to Donna, “you are a super lady.”

Donna curtsied slightly, a bright smile on her face. “Oh, I like the cut of your jib.” She raised her glass. “Chin, chin.”

The slang made the Doctor cringe, but it wasn’t as bad as it could have been, so he let it go… for now.

He offered his hand to Roger. “Hello. I’m the Doctor. My wife Rose and our daughter Jenny, and our friend Donna Noble.”

Roger stepped back and nodded at all of them. “How do you do?”

“Very well,” the Doctor replied.

The same servant who’d made their drinks appeared at Roger’s elbow. “Your usual, sir?”

“Ah.” Roger took a sip of the drink and smiled at the footman. “Thank you, Davenport. Just how I like it.”

Jenny shifted closer to him, and he looked down at his daughter. “I thought families were supposed to have the same surname,” she whispered. “But this family doesn’t.”

“I was about to ask the same thing,” Donna agreed.

The Doctor nodded at Lady Eddison, who was fussing over her invalid husband. “The Eddison title descends through her.” He gestured towards the son. “One day Roger will be a lord.”

Greeves appeared at the edge of the lawn again, this time with a fashionably dressed young woman
just behind him. “Robina Redmond.”

Lady Eddison’s eyes sparkled as she looked at the guests already gathered. “She’s the absolute hit of the social scene,” she explained as the young woman sashayed out onto the lawn. “A must. Miss Redmond.”

The young woman smiled and shook the hand her ladyship offered. “Spiffing to meet you at last, my lady.” Her smile slipped when she glanced around at the rest of the party. “What super fun,” she whispered, softly enough that the Doctor doubted anyone else heard.

*She’s trying too hard, Doctor.*

He nodded, but Greeves announced the next guest before he could say anything about Miss Redmond’s fake pedigree.

“Reverend Arnold Golightly.”

The vicar they’d seen earlier joined them, and Lady Eddison held her hand out for him to take. “Ah, Reverend. How are you? I heard about the church last Thursday night. Those ruffians breaking in.”

“You apprehended them, I hear,” Colonel Curbishley added.

The vicar nodded. “As the Christian Fathers taught me, we must forgive them their trespasses.” A smirk settled on the reverend’s face that didn’t match his words or his profession. “Quite literally.”

“Some of these young boys deserve a decent thrashing,” Roger declared.

Davenport appeared at his side again, simpering up at him. “Couldn’t agree more, sir.”

*Ah. That’s what was off about the way he tried to flirt with Donna a moment ago, Rose said. It was just an act, so no one would notice he’s gay.*

Donna had apparently had the same thought. She snorted and shook her head. “Typical. All the decent men are on the other bus.” She smirked at the Doctor. “You don’t count—you’re married.”

“Quite happily,” the Doctor agreed.

“Now, my lady,” Roger said to his mother. “What about this special guest you promised us?”

Lady Eddison pointed towards the house. “Here she is. A lady who needs no introduction.”

A tall, blonde woman in her thirties strode across the lawn to the accompaniment of applause, no matter that she tried to hold her hands out to keep them from applauding.

“No, no, please, don’t,” she said. “Thank you, Lady Eddison. Honestly, there’s no need.” She turned to the Doctor and held her hand out. “Agatha Christie.”

“What about her?” Donna asked before anyone else could say anything.

Agatha blinked; that clearly wasn’t the response she’d been expecting. “That’s me.”

“No!” Donna gasped. “You’re kidding.”

The Doctor walked over to her and took her hand, a giddy smile on his face. “Agatha Christie,” he gushed, shaking her hand energetically. “I was just talking about you the other day. I said, ‘I bet she’s brilliant.’ I’m the Doctor. This is Rose, Jenny, and Donna. Oh, I love your stuff. What a mind.
You fool me every time,” he said, before he realised it wasn’t exactly the truth. “Well, almost every
time.” He tugged on his ear. “Well, once or twice. Well, once. But it was a good once.”

Rose groaned. “Just… just trust me, Mrs. Christie. That was high praise coming from him.”

Agatha’s gaze darted back and forth between them. “You’re too accustomed to excusing your
husband’s rather unusual behaviour…?"

“Rose. Rose Tyler,” Rose provided, hearing the leading question. “And I am, but I don’t mind.”

“Excuse me,” Donna interrupted. “How did you know they were married?”

Agatha looked over the Doctor’s shoulder at Donna. “Even if they weren’t wearing wedding rings,
Mrs. Tyler’s comment was far too familiar to come from anyone but a wife.”

The Doctor grinned. “Oh, you are good.”

Lady Eddison had been lurking on the edge of their conversation, but she was clearly tired of waiting
for her honoured guest to pay attention to her. She cut into the conversation swiftly, putting an arm
on Agatha’s shoulder and turning her away from the Doctor, Rose, Jenny, and Donna. “Mrs.
Christie, I’m so glad you could come. I’m one of your greatest followers. I’ve read all six of your
books.” She paused and looked around, clearly expecting another person. “Ah, is, er, Mr. Christie
not joining us?”

Agatha’s spine stiffened and she turned to look down at Lady Eddison. “Is he needed? Can’t a
woman make her own way in the world?”

“Don’t give my wife ideas,” the colonel said, breaking the tension without even realising he’d done
so.

Roger jumped in, apparently familiar with where that teasing comment would go. “Now Mrs.
Christie, I have a question. Why a Belgian detective?”

Rose, Donna, and Jenny moved to mingle with the other guests, but the Doctor scooped up the paper
that rested on Colonel Curbishley’s lap. “Excuse me, Colonel.” A glimmer of suspicion had entered
the Doctor’s mind when Agatha showed such open hostility toward marriage, and he wanted to
check his theory.

The conversation continued around him, but the Doctor stopped hearing it once he registered the date
at the top of the paper. He pressed his lips into a thin line and motioned for Rose, Donna, and Jenny
to join him.

The three women all gave him curious looks, then smiled at their conversation partners and casually
crossed the lawn to join him.

“Is something wrong, Dad?” Jenny asked.

The Doctor couldn’t take his eyes off Agatha Christie. “The date on this newspaper,” he whispered,
holding it up for them to see.

“What about it?” Donna asked.

He took a breath. “It’s the day Agatha Christie disappeared.”

Rose looked over his shoulder and frowned. “It’s a bit warm for December, isn’t it?”
The Doctor blinked. “Now that you mention it, one doesn’t usually sit outside sipping sidecars in December, no matter how mild English winters are.”

Donna rolled her eyes. “Only you would find something ominous in unseasonably good weather.”

He shook his head as he set the paper back down. “Donna, you’re wearing a summer dress in December. The lawn is green and the flowers are in bloom. There is something very not right about all of this.”

He shoved his hands into his pockets and turned in a slow circle. “The last time I witnessed global warming on this scale…”

The memory was right there, but it slipped away when he caught sight of Agatha Christie, chatting with Lady Eddison and her son, her drink in hand and a fake smile on her face. The sight diverted his attention from the weather, back to the significance of the date.

“She’d just discovered her husband was having an affair,” he murmured, speaking just loud enough for the three women to hear him.

“Oh, that’s awful,” Jenny breathed.

Donna shook her head. “You’d never think to look at her, smiling away.”

The Doctor rocked back on his heels and nodded in Agatha’s direction. “Well, she’s British and moneyed. That’s what they do. They carry on. Except for this one time. No one knows exactly what happened. She just vanished. Her car will be found tomorrow morning by the side of a lake. Ten days later, Agatha Christie turns up in a hotel in Harrogate. Said she’d lost her memory. She never spoke about the disappearance till the day she died, but whatever it was…”

“We’re here on the day that it’s going to happen,” Rose said, an irrepressible smile on her face. “Of course the TARDIS didn’t just take us someplace completely random.”

The Doctor nodded. “I’ve always wondered what happened, and now I get to find out.”

The Indian housekeeper, who had been sent to collect the remaining guest, came running back onto the lawn, waving her hand around. “Professor! The library! Murder! Murder!”

The words sent the posh guests into a tizzy, and while everyone was demanding more information of Miss Chandrakala, the Doctor turned to the butler. “Greeves, old chap, could you point me in the direction of the library?”

“It’s on the ground floor, sir. Just off the main corridor from the foyer.”

The Doctor took off running, and he heard Rose offer a hurried, “Thanks ever so much!” to the servant as they abandoned the party.

Inside, he turned in a quick circle in the middle of the foyer, then made a guess and dove for a door. He spotted bookshelves as he opened the door, and the body on the floor confirmed he’d made the right choice.

The Doctor put his glasses on as he and Rose crouched beside the dead man.

“Oh, my goodness,” Greeves moaned from the doorway.

“Bashed on the head—blunt instrument,” the Doctor announced. He tapped the watch face, but the
hands didn’t move. “Watch broke as he fell. Time of death was quarter past four.” He leapt to his feet and shuffled through the papers on the desk, hoping to find something that would explain why someone would want to kill the professor.

“There’s a pipe here on the floor,” Rose said.

Donna hummed consideringly. “Call me Hercules Poirot, but I reckon that’s blunt enough.”

Movement out of the corner of his eye caught the Doctor’s attention, and he watched Agatha’s reflection in the glass curio cabinet as she bent down and plucked a piece of paper out of the fire pit.

He sighed when he reached the bottom of the stack of papers. “Nothing worth killing for in that lot. Dry as dust.”

*That doesn’t make sense,* Rose told him. *He said he was coming to the library to look something up, so surely there’s something…*

She took the papers from him and flipped through them herself while Donna and Jenny crowded around him. “So maybe we’re not here for the jewel thief after all,” Jenny suggested.

The Doctor pressed his tongue to the back of his teeth. “So it would seem, Jenny.”


He immediately recognised the words as the title of an Agatha Christie novel, but he had a feeling that wasn’t Donna’s point.

She shook her head, but there was an excited gleam in her eyes. “I mean, Professor Peach, in the library, with the lead piping?”

“That’s like that game we played the other night, Dad. Cluedo?”

The remaining guests and their hosts crowded into the small room before the Doctor could answer either woman’s question. Lady Eddison was beside herself, and the entire party exclaimed, in restrained terms, over how horrible the death was.

Agatha remained a voice of reason. “Someone should call the police.”

The Doctor shook his head. If the TARDIS had dropped them here on purpose, there was a good chance the situation was more than a human policeman could handle. He showed the psychic paper again, focusing primarily on Agatha Christie. “You don’t have to. Chief Inspector Tyler from Scotland Yard, known as the Doctor. My family and I are on holiday, but it appears death doesn’t take a holiday.”

Rose snorted softly, and he winked at her.

“I say,” Lady Eddison moaned, clutching her necklaces.

The Doctor met her questioning gaze with a steady one of his own. “Mrs. Christie was right. Go into the sitting room. I will question each of you in turn.”

“Come along,” Agatha said, ushering everyone out of the room. “Do as the Doctor says. Leave the room undisturbed.”

As soon as they had the room to themselves again, the Doctor got down on the floor in front of the body, while Rose bent down and patted at the professor’s pockets. There had to be something they
were missing…

“When we said we were going to a party, I wasn’t expecting we’d find a dead body,” Jenny said. “I mean… the other adventures we’ve had, we’ve been thrown right in from the start.”

Rose chuckled. “It’s like that sometimes, Jenny,” she told her. “We go to a party, thinking we’re just going to have a bit of fun, and then something happens.”

“Although this is the first time the adventure has been anything as mundane as a murder mystery,” Donna added.

The Doctor spotted a drop of slime on the floor. “Maybe not so mundane,” he said, scraping some of it up. He jumped up and showed it to the three of them. “Morphic residue.”

Rose frowned. “The stuff shape-shifting aliens leave behind when they change form?”

He held it up to the light. “Exactly.”

“The murderer’s an alien?” Jenny’s eyes sparkled with excitement.

The Doctor nodded. “Which means one of that lot is an alien in human form.”

“Yeah, but think about it.” Donna put her hand on his shoulder. “There’s a murder, a mystery, and Agatha Christie.”

“So? Happens to me all the time.” He sniffed the residue and then stuck it under Rose’s nose.

“Smells like burnt toast,” she offered.

“Which means our murderer is an insectoid… though that doesn’t narrow it down much.”

“Like I was saying,” Donna said, her blue eyes narrowed in determination as she pressed her point. “Agatha Christie didn’t walk around surrounded by murders. Not really. I mean, that’s like meeting Charles Dickens and he’s surrounded by ghosts at Christmas.”

“We’ve done that actually,” Rose said. “And Shakespeare and witches.”

“Oh, come on!” Donna rolled her eyes. “And I suppose now you’re going to tell me we could drive across country and find Enid Blyton having tea with Noddy.”

Rose kept a straight face, and Donna’s jaw dropped.

“Noddy’s not real. Is he? Tell me there’s no Noddy.”

The Doctor bent down to look her in the eyes. “There’s no Noddy,” he said firmly, then jogged out of the room.

Rose shrugged at the disappointed woman. “Sorry, Donna, but they can’t all be real.”

Donna sighed. “I suppose.”

“Who’s Noddy?” Jenny asked.

Rose and Donna laughed. “He’s a character in a series of books. We’ve got them on the TARDIS—you can read them later.”
Donna grabbed them both by the hand. “Come on, let’s go after the Doctor, before he gets into alien trouble without us.”

They caught up with the Doctor at the foot of the stairs. “Next thing you know, you’ll be telling me it’s like *Murder on the Orient Express*, and they all did it,” Donna said.

Rose sighed and rubbed her temple when a familiar voice came from the alcove off the stairwell. “Murder on the Orient Express?” Agatha repeated as she joined them.

Rose grabbed Donna’s hand and squeezed hard, and for once, the ginger took the hint and kept her mouth shut.

Agatha tapped her chin. “That’s a marvellous idea.” She shook her head. “I have a feeling this day will give me more book plots than I have time to write,” she said ruefully.

The Doctor stepped forward and rubbed his hands together. “Agatha, Rose, and I will question the suspects. Donna, you and Jenny search the bedrooms. Look for clues. Any more residue,” he added in a whisper as he pulled a large magnifying glass out of his jacket pocket. “You’ll need this.”

Donna’s lips curled in a sneer as she looked at the traditional detective’s tool. “Is that for real?”

Jenny grabbed the magnifying glass out of the Doctor’s hand and danced up a few steps. “Come on, Donna,” she said. “I’ve never gotten to help Dad on one of his investigations before.”

Donna sighed, but she didn’t protest any further. With one last look at the Doctor and Rose, she turned and followed Jenny up the stairs.

Once she was gone, the Doctor beamed at Agatha and bounced lightly on his toes. “Right then. Solving a murder mystery with Agatha Christie. Brilliant.”

“How like a man to have fun while there’s disaster all around him,” Agatha snapped.

The Doctor took a half-step back from her, then stopped and straightened. “That’s not what I meant,” he said calmly. “I’ve been a fan of yours for”—He caught himself before he could say how long—“since you published your first novel,” he amended. “Of course I’m excited I get to work with you on a case.” He sighed and put his hands in his pockets. “I suppose I did sound a bit flippant. Sorry about that.”

Agatha stared at him, an inscrutable expression on her face. Finally, she sighed and shook her head. “I’m afraid, Doctor, that you are going to be disappointed,” she said, her voice weary. “I’m merely an author, not a detective.” Before he could argue, she walked past him and stood in the library door. “Our first suspect will be joining us any minute. We should get ready.”
In the library, Agatha took the chair in front of the empty fireplace while Rose sat down in the corner, almost out of sight. The Doctor raised his eyebrows, but she shook her head and crossed her legs at the ankles.

“If no one notices I’m here, I might be able to pick up on things you and Agatha miss,” she explained. “Just make sure you don’t block my view when you start pacing, Doctor,” she added, giving him a cheeky smile and a wink.

Agatha looked at the two of them, a funny smile on her face. “Husband and wife, solving crimes together. You remind me of Tommy and Tuppence.”

“Rose has a keen eye,” the Doctor said as he positioned a chair directly in front of the large window. “She always sees things I miss.”

A knock at the door interrupted their conversation. Reverend Golightly entered the room, and the Doctor pointed at the waiting chair.

Once he was seated, the Doctor clasped his hands behind his back and started pacing—being sure not to block Rose’s view, as instructed. “Now then, Reverend. Where were you at a quarter past four?”

“Let me think.”

The Doctor’s left eyebrow arched—barely an hour had passed since the professor had been killed. That was hardly long enough for anyone to have forgotten what they’d been doing at the time.

“Let me think,” is a way to stall for time while you figure out how to answer, Rose pointed out.

The Doctor nodded. That was exactly what it felt like to him.

It only took the vicar a moment to recall, however. “Why yes, I remember. I was unpacking in my room.”

“No alibi, then.” The Doctor watched carefully, and the skin around the vicar’s mouth tightened slightly at the casual observation.

“You were alone?” Agatha pressed, giving him a chance to produce an alibi.

The discomfiture disappeared, replaced by a serene smile. “With the Lord, one is never truly alone.” He looked up at the Doctor, clearly expecting to be dismissed. “Doctor?”

The Doctor nodded.

That was a rather neat way to side-step the question, wasn’t it? Rose said as the reverend stood up and left the room.

Yes, it was, the Doctor agreed. And he didn’t appreciate me pointing out that he had no alibi either.

Roger Curbishley entered the room, ending their conversation. The Doctor stared at the young aristocrat, trying to look him in the eye but unable to look away from his disastrous orange-and-white striped tie. “And where were you?”
“Let me think.”

The Doctor pressed his lips together. *Is everyone hiding something?*

“I was…” Roger tugged on his tie and straightened the knot. “Oh, yes. I was taking a constitutional in the fields behind the house. Just taking a stroll, that’s all.”

“Alone?” the Doctor asked, then watched in astonishment as the most fake smile he’d ever seen stretched across Roger’s face. He’d always thought “pasting a smile on” was simply a metaphor, but the future Lord Eddison might as well have been wearing a paper mask, so bad was his acting job.

“Oh, yes, all alone. Totally alone. Absolutely alone. Completely. All of the time.”

*He was with Davenport, Doctor.*

The Doctor nodded at Rose as Roger continued his utterly unbelievable description of his afternoon.

“I wandered lonely as the proverbial cloud. There was no one else with me. Not at all. Not ever.”

“All right,” the Doctor cut in. “I think you can go now. Perhaps you can spend the rest of the evening before dinner… alone.”

The tips of Roger’s ears turned red, and he made his way hastily out of the library. Miss Robina Redmond entered next and took the chair. With her ankles crossed and her hands resting in her lap, she looked more composed than either of the two people they’d questioned so far.

“And where were you?” The Doctor took a moment and peered down at Agatha’s notebook, filled with neat shorthand, then he looked back at the suspect.

“At a quarter past four.” She stared at the wall above the fireplace, her brow furrowed in concentration. “Well, I went to the toilet when I arrived, and then um…” Her frown cleared, and her eyes brightened in a smile. “Oh, yes, I remember. I was preparing myself. Positively buzzing with excitement about the party and the super fun of meeting Lady Eddy.”

*She’s lying, but I don’t know what about. I don’t think she was the murderer, but she’s definitely keeping something from us.*

The Doctor nodded to acknowledge Rose’s comment, then tapped his fingers together and looked at Miss Redmond. “We’ve only got your word for it.”

The socialite’s lips curled in a smirk. “That’s your problem, not mine.”

The Doctor narrowed his eyes, but nodded when the young woman inclined her head as if to ask if she was free to go.

“Quite an insolent young woman,” Agatha murmured in the lull between suspects.

“Very,” the Doctor agreed. “But insolence is not necessarily indicative of homicidal tendencies.”

Greeves rolled Colonel Curbishley into the library, then quietly moved out of the way so the Doctor could question him.

“And where were you, sir?”

“Quarter past four?” The colonel twiddled his thumbs. “Dear me, let me think. Ah, yes, I remember. I was in me study, reading through some military memoirs. Fascinating stuff. Took me back to my
days in the army. Started reminiscing. Mafeking, you know. Terrible war.”

The older man didn’t look like he was lost in memories of the horrors of war, and the Doctor decided rather quickly that he didn’t want to know what the gentleman was actually thinking about.

“Colonel, snap out of it,” he ordered.

Curbishley blinked. “I was in me study—”

The Doctor shook his head. “No, no, no. Right out of it.”

“Oh, sorry.” The colonel’s face flushed dark red. “Got a bit carried away there.”

“Didn’t you just,” the Doctor said drily, before nodding at Greeves to wheel his employer out of the room.

Lady Eddison was the last to be questioned, as befitted her station. She sat in the chair with her back straight and her hands clasped in her lap.

The Doctor leaned back against the mantel. “And where were you at a quarter past four, my lady?”

“Now, let me see.” Lady Eddison closed her eyes and reached for her necklaces, playing with the large jewel pendant as she thought. “Yes, I remember. I was sitting in the Blue Room, taking my afternoon tea.” She opened her eyes and gave the Doctor a patronising smile. “It’s a ritual of mine. I needed to gather strength for the duty of hostess. I then proceeded to the lawn where I met you, Doctor, and I said, who exactly might you be and what are you doing here? And you said, I am the Doctor… My wife, Rose Tyler—”

“Yes, yes,” the Doctor interrupted when she looked over at Rose. “You can stop now. I was there for that bit.”

“Of course.” She nodded, then a hiccup escaped her, and the Doctor had a sudden suspicion she hadn’t been taking tea in the Blue Room, after all. Lady Eddison closed her eyes and turned her head away in humiliation, confirming his guess. “Excuse me.”

“It’s all right, my lady,” Rose said gently. “If you’d like to go back to your hostess duties, we need to talk about what we’ve learned.”

The older woman was too grateful to be excused to notice she’d actually been dismissed. She fled the room, and Rose watched in amusement as the Doctor and Agatha both paced in front of the fireplace.

“Are we going to question the servants?” Rose asked.

“Not yet,” Agatha said. “If we discover none of the guests or the hosts are the murderer, then perhaps…” She tapped her pen to lips as she paced. “No alibis for any of them. The Secret Adversary remains hidden. We must look for a motive. Use ze little grey cells,” she said, tapping her temple.

“I’m sorry, Agatha,” Rose interrupted. “Did you say no one has an alibi?”

Agatha blinked and looked over at her. “Yes, that’s right. Or did you catch something we missed, Mrs. Tyler?”

“You can call me Rose, please.” She bit her lip; she had no intentions of outing Roger, but she also
didn’t want him to be a murder suspect when he was clearly innocent. “It’s just… didn’t you notice how insistent Roger was that he was alone? Like… he didn’t want us to question who he might have been with?”

Agatha’s eyes widened. “You’re absolutely right, Rose. So, the son is having an affair with someone his parents wouldn’t approve of.” She looked at the Doctor. “I see why you insisted Rose question them with us, Doctor. More than a keen eye, she has an innate understanding of people. Somehow, I have a feeling she often helps you in your police work.”

Rose basked in the pride in the Doctor’s eyes, and what he projected over the bond. “Oh, yes,” he agreed, a wide grin stretching across his face. “The higher-ups at Scotland Yard wouldn’t understand, but Rose is an invaluable help in all my investigations. I couldn’t do it without her.”

The author waved her pen at the Doctor. “That doesn’t surprise me at all,” she told him. “For such an experienced detective, you missed a big clue.”

“What, that bit of paper you nicked out the fire?” the Doctor countered.

The surprise on the author’s face amused Rose, and she settled in to watch the game of verbal tennis. “You were looking the other way.”

The corners of the Doctor’s mouth curled up in a smug smile. “Yeah, but I saw you reflected in the glass of the bookcase.”

A true smile crossed Agatha’s face. “You crafty man. This is all that was left.” She picked up the scrap of paper from where she’d left it on top of the mantel, and the Doctor and Rose both crowded around to take a look at it.

There were only five letters on the charred scrap: *aiden*. The first letter was almost legible, and Rose leaned closer for a better look.

“What’s that first letter?” she asked. “*N* or *M*?”

“It’s an ‘M,’” Agatha said. “The word is maiden.”

“Maiden!” the Doctor exclaimed, making Agatha jump. “What does that mean?”

“Maiden name?” Rose suggested. “We heard the professor say he wanted to check something in the library before the party started. If there was some kind of paperwork… secret wedding license, perhaps? That’s the kind of scandal someone might be willing to kill to hide.”

Agatha put most of her weight on one foot and rested her hand on the opposite hip. “Oh yes, Rose, I believe you are quite indispensable to the Doctor.” She sighed and shook her head. “Sadly, that speculation brings us no closer to finding our *Nemesis*. Hopefully Miss Noble and Miss Tyler found something more definitive.”

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“Donna, can I ask you something?” Jenny asked as they rifled through the Colonel’s study.

Donna held up a magazine between her thumb and forefinger. The pictures might have been drawings instead of photographs, but she recognised a girlie mag when she saw one. “Oh, I do not want to know what he does with that,” she muttered, then tossed it aside. “Yeah, go ahead Jenny. You can always ask me anything.”
Jenny bit her lip, then nodded once. She couldn’t really back away now, not once she’d brought it up.

“Why are you so defensive all the time?”

Donna’s spine stiffened, and when she spun around to look at Jenny, there were red spots on her cheeks. “What do you mean, defensive? I’m not defensive!”

“You’re doing it right now,” Jenny pointed out calmly. “It’s like… like you have to get angry with people before they can be angry with you.”

Donna’s eyes flashed, and Jenny sucked in a breath. “Oh, that’s it. Because the best defence is a good offence. That’s why all the offensive measures were downloaded into a new soldier’s mind first, so we could protect our weaknesses by making the Hath too weak to attack.”

“We’re done in this room.” Donna stalked past Jenny. “Time to go search the bedrooms.”

It was obvious even to someone who’d only been born a month ago that Donna had no desire to talk about this, but Jenny had her father’s tenacity. She set her jaw and followed after the other woman, barely catching up with her before she disappeared around the corner.

“I don’t understand though, Donna,” she said as Donna flung open the bedroom door so hard that it hit the wall behind it. “You’re brilliant, and so much fun. Why do you constantly expect people to get upset with you?”

Donna pressed her lips together, but Jenny thought she saw her chin tremble and a glint of moisture in her eyes. “I’m not talking about this,” Donna said, but the words didn’t come out as harshly as Jenny thought she’d maybe been trying for.

Jenny hesitated, then nodded. “All right.”

Donna took a deep breath, then nodded once she felt like she was in control again. “Right, let’s get on with this,” she said, hoping her voice didn’t sound as shaky as she felt.

She couldn’t stop thinking about what Jenny had said, though. Memories she’d suppressed leaked out—all the times she’d been told that you caught more flies with honey than with vinegar, or the irony of her mother saying that she’d never find a man willing to put up with her sharp tongue.

“Did Rose put you up to this?” she blurted out as they went into the next room. They still hadn’t found a clue, not even a trace of the sticky substance the Doctor had called morphic residue.

Jenny crossed the room to the bureau and opened the top drawer. “Did Rose put me up to what?” she asked absently.

Donna stared at her with a hand on her hip. It took Jenny a moment to register the silence, but when she looked up and took in Donna’s posture, comprehension flashed through her eyes.

“Oh!” She slid the drawer of the bureau shut. “No, I just… I thought you didn’t want to talk about it.”

“I don’t, but I can’t stop thinking about it. So we might as well talk.” She was gratified to see Jenny shift uncomfortably from one foot to the other. At least she wasn’t the only one who was uncomfortable with the conversation. “What made you ask that?” she pressed. “If it wasn’t Rose, then…”
Jenny tilted her head and studied Donna for a moment. “It was… I listened to you earlier, when Dad gave you the magnifying glass, and I realised that you don’t know.”

“I don’t know what?” Donna snapped. Whether she’d meant to or not, Jenny had stepped into her biggest insecurity—all the things she didn’t know.

And the smile on the other woman’s face didn’t make Donna feel any better. “That’s just it, Donna,” Jenny said. “You don’t realise how brilliant Dad thinks you are. Well, both of them,” she amended quickly. “But you poke at Dad more than you do Rose, so I feel like you’re more defensive of that.”

Donna snorted. “Oh, yeah. He thinks I’m so brilliant. Me, the human who was stupid enough to get engaged to a man who was conspiring with a giant spider to take over the planet.” She shook her head. “I don’t know why the Doctor and Rose invited me to travel with them, but it wasn’t because of my brain.”

Jenny shook her head. “No, you’re wrong, Donna. Why do you think Dad trusted you to go through the rooms? He knows that if something is out of place, you’ll spot it.”

Donna wanted to believe her, but three decades of experience told her that no one kept her around for her brain. She was so used to the snide comments about her intelligence that she hadn’t even noticed Lance sneering at her until that last day.

She glanced around the room and shook her head. “Well, there’s nothing to spot in here. Come on, next room.”

But the last door in the corridor wouldn’t open. When the knob wouldn’t twist, Donna crouched down, trying to peer through the keyhole.

“You won’t find anything in there.”

Donna squeaked and spun around to glare at the butler, who had appeared out of nowhere.

“Why is it locked?” Jenny asked while Donna was still recovering from the surprise.

The butler straightened and looked down his nose at them. “Lady Eddison commands it to be so.”

His implacable expression pricked at Donna’s temper. “And I command it to be otherwise.” Greeves frowned at her. “Scotland Yard. Pip, pip.”

His nostrils flared, but he acquiesced, pulling a key out of his pocket as he moved around her. Donna smirked as he unlocked the door; sometimes it really did work to be just a little bit prickly.

“So you didn’t actually tell us why it’s locked,” Jenny pointed out. “Lady Eddison commands… but why?”

Donna grinned at the younger woman and gave her a thumbs up over Greeves’ shoulder.

“Many years ago, when my father was butler to the family, Lady Eddison returned from India with malaria. She locked herself in this room for six months until she recovered. Since then, the room has remained undisturbed.”

He pushed the door open and Donna strode past him into a room lit only by the sunlight filtering in through heavy curtains.

“There’s nothing in here,” Greeves repeated, his voice quiet but firm.
Donna tried to stop thinking about Jenny’s questions, and focus on the mystery of the locked room. “How long’s it been empty?” she asked, looking at the short bed and the teddy bear sitting at the foot of it.

“Forty years.”

Jenny snuck past them and ran her fingers over the wooden paneling that went halfway up the walls. “Why would she seal it off?” she wondered.

Donna nodded once and spared a single glance for the butler, who clearly was waiting for them to realise they didn’t need to disturb this room after all. “All right, we need to investigate. You just butle off.” Greeves sighed, but he finally disappeared.

Donna closed the door behind him, then looked at Jenny, who was holding the bear. “Well, if I’m here because they know I’ll spot something, I guess we’d better get to work.”

Jenny put the bear down, then took a deep breath and looked at Donna. “I didn’t mean to upset you,” she said. “I just… I only figured this out this afternoon, and it felt important that you know how important you are to all of us. Dad and Rose don’t invite people in the TARDIS if they can’t keep up. I’ve only been around for a month and I’ve already figured that much out.”

“Look, I can’t think—”

Loud buzzing interrupted Donna’s attempt to brush off Jenny’s repeated compliment. Donna shook her head and followed the noise to the window. “Nineteen twenty-six, they’ve still got bees,” she muttered. “Oh, what a noise. All right, busy bee, I’ll let you out.” She smirked and put on a Belgian accent. “Hold on, I shall find you with my amazing powers of detection.”

She pulled the curtain back, expecting that a normal honeybee would buzz into the room, grateful to be free. Instead, she came face to face with a wasp bigger than she was.

“What is that?” Jenny backed up with Donna against the wall as the wasp swung its stinger and used it to break the glass.

Donna shook her head. “That’s impossible.” The wasp flew over to them, and Donna grabbed Jenny’s hand and slowly circled away from the enormous insect until her back was to the broken window.

“Doctor!”

“Dad!”

The wasp flew closer, and sunlight caught and reflected off its eyes. That gave Donna an idea, and she quickly lifted the magnifying glass over her head, focusing the sun into a narrow beam that burned the wasp.

Donna had never known insects shrieked in pain, and she could have happily gone the rest of her life without that knowledge. But the pain incapacitated the wasp for long enough to let her and Jenny run for the door, so she couldn’t regret her actions.

As soon as they were out of the room, Donna flung the door shut behind her. But two inches of solid English oak wasn’t enough to keep the wasp away; its sting slid through the wood like a knife through hot butter. Footsteps pounded up the stairs, and a moment later, to her utter relief, the Doctor, Rose, and Agatha Christie appeared.
“Dad!” Jenny gasped. “There’s a… on the other side…” She shook her head and pointed at Donna.

“It’s a giant wasp,” Donna said, a little breathless herself.

The Doctor blinked at her. “What do you mean, a giant wasp?”

Donna bristled. After everything he saw, a giant wasp surprised him? “I mean, a wasp that’s giant,” she ground out.

Agatha rolled her eyes at them. “It’s only a silly little insect.”

“Ah, Agatha?” Rose pointed at the door, and Donna was gratified to see her finger was shaking. “I don’t think Donna’s exaggerating when she says the wasp was giant.”

The Doctor stared at the sting for a long moment before flinging the door open. “Let me see.”

To his disappointment, the room was empty. He lingered in the doorway for a moment, waiting to see if it was merely hiding, but then he registered the silence, which was more telling than what he could see.

The Doctor shook his head. “It’s gone. Buzzed off.”

“We found it by the window,” Jenny told him, and they ran over to where the curtains were flapping in the breeze coming in through the open window.

“But that’s fascinating.”

Agatha’s words caught his attention, and he spun back around just in time to see her reaching for the sting. Rose grabbed her elbow and pulled her back. “I don’t think we should touch that,” she cautioned.

The Doctor pulled a test tube out of his pocket and slid in between Rose and Agatha and the door. “Thank you, Rose,” he said as he got down on his knees in front of the sting. The insect body part was oozing with morphic residue, so at least now they knew what form the alien took when it wasn’t human.

He snatched Agatha’s pencil out of her hands. “Giant wasp,” he mused as he dipped the pencil in the residue and scraped it into the test tube. “Well, that narrows it down from the tons of other amorphous insectivorous lifeforms, but I still don’t know what it’s doing here—none of the species I can think of live in this galactic vector.”

“I think I understood some of those words,” Agatha said. “Enough to know that you’re completely potty.”

“Lost its sting, though. That makes it defenceless,” Donna pointed out.

The Doctor shook his head. “Oh, a creature this size? Got to be able to grow a new one.”

“Can we return to sanity?” Agatha demanded. “There are no such things as giant wasps.”

“Excuse you.” Jenny crossed her arms over her chest and glared at the author. “I know what I saw. And if there wasn’t a giant wasp, where did that sting come from? It’s not like Donna and I were hiding it in our dresses.”

Rose nodded. “Clearly, there is a giant wasp buzzing around. The question is, why is it here?”
The Doctor dropped the test tube into his pocket and pushed himself to his feet. “Exactly. And not just here, but killing people.”

“Seriously, Doctor.” Agatha glared at him. “Finding a murderer is not supposed to be an Ordeal by Innocence, whereby you absolve everyone of guilt and pin it on a fantastic monster that doesn’t exist!”

At that point, the Doctor ignored the author’s protests. The murderer was an alien, and there was nothing to be gained by wasting time arguing with Agatha Christie over that fact.

The test tube in his pocket was their best clue, and he started down the stairs, intending to go back to the TARDIS to analyse the substance. At least then he’d have a planet of origin, instead of a Destination Unknown.

Rose groaned and nudged him in the side. Really, Doctor? You’re using Christie titles even in your private thoughts now?

He bumped his hip into hers. Oh, come on. It’s fun.

“What are we going to do now, Dad?” Jenny asked as they jogged down the stairs.

Before the Doctor could answer, they heard a thud from the direction of the front lawn. Rose grabbed his hand, and the two of them took off down the stairs at a full run, letting Jenny, Donna, and Agatha trail after them.

The front door was open, letting the unseasonably warm air into the house. Just beyond the door, Miss Chandrakala was sprawled out on the gravel drive, pinned down by a stone gargoyle.

Agatha knelt down by the woman’s head just in time to hear her dying words. “The poor little child.”

Buzzing filled the air, and the Doctor spun away from the dead housekeeper, scanning the skies for the form he knew he would find. Where are you…

“There!” he shouted when he found the wasp, buzzing near the second storey windows. He took off back into the house, shouting, “Come on!” over his shoulder as he reached the door.

He hit the stairs at a run, and a moment later, he heard footsteps right behind him. “Always with the running,” Jenny panted as they went after the wasp.

The Doctor laughed as he grabbed onto the newel post and pivoted to the next flight of stairs.

“Yeah, but this makes a change,” Donna said. “There’s a monster, and we’re chasing it.”

“It can’t be a monster,” Agatha insisted. “It’s a trick. They Do it with Mirrors.”

Rose rolled her eyes when the author dropped the title of one of her future novels into the conversation. The Doctor grinned over at her.

It’s fun, Rose. You should try it.

Their teasing screeched to a halt when the wasp sting loomed in front of them.

“By all that’s holy,” Agatha murmured.

“I don’t see any mirrors here,” Jenny commented. Rose and Agatha both looked at her, but it was hard to tell if she was being cheeky, or just offering an innocent observation.
“Oh, but you are wonderful,” the Doctor rhapsodised as the wasp lowered itself into the corridor.

The giant insect slowly flew closer to them, and they backed up a step.

The Doctor held his hand out. “Now, just stop. Stop there.”

Instead, the wasp lunged at them, sting pointing directly at their faces. They all dove for cover, and it hit the wall just being where their heads had been, leaving a long gash in the wood and paint.

The Doctor looked up carefully, hoping the miss would convince the wasp to fly away. However, it appeared to be preparing for another strike, and the Doctor looked frantically around the hallway for something they could use to defend themselves.

Donna was a step ahead of him. “Oi, fly boy.” She held up the magnifying glass, and the wasp backed away, then turned around and buzzed down the hallway.

“Don’t let it get away!” The Doctor jumped to his feet and raced after it, and everyone else followed him. “Quick, before it reverts back to human form. Where are you? Come on.” He ran around a corner and stopped at the end of a long corridor. “There’s nowhere to run. Show yourself!”

Jenny reached his side just as every door opened. “Well, that didn’t help,” she muttered when each member of the party stuck their heads out into the corridor.

The Doctor scratched at his cheek. “No, it really didn’t,” he agreed.

Lady Eddison walked towards them from the opposite end of the hallway. “Is something the matter, Doctor?”

Rose met her ladyship halfway. “I’m afraid so, my lady. There’s been another murder.”

Lady Eddison covered her mouth with her handkerchief. “Oh, my word. What poor soul has been taken now?”

“Your housekeeper, Miss Chandrakala.”

Roger pushed past Rose to support his mother when she swayed in shock. “Is this really the right place to have this conversation?” he protested.

“Quite right, lad,” his father said. “Let’s take this to the drawing room so we can sit down. It’s almost time for pre-dinner drinks, anyway.”

Roger and Lady Eddison led the way, with the Doctor, Rose, Jenny, and Donna and bringing up the rear.

“So it was one of them, right?” Jenny asked quietly as they went downstairs. “The wasp couldn’t have gotten away?”

The Doctor shook his head. “That hallway dead ends at the master suite. There was no way out except through one of the rooms. And since someone appeared in every doorway, and no one screamed about a giant wasp flying through their room…”

“One of the guests, or Lady Eddison and her family, is an alien,” Donna concluded as they reached the drawing room.

“My faithful companion, this is terrible,” Lady Eddison moaned as she sank onto the couch. She pressed her handkerchief to her eyes, dabbing the tears away.
Davenport pushed Colonel Curbishley into the room, then addressed her ladyship. “Excuse me, my lady, but she was on her way to tell you something.”

Lady Eddison sniffed and shook her head. “She never found me. She had an Appointment with Death instead,” she sobbed.

The Doctor stood in front of the window and looked at the group. “She said, ‘the poor little child.’ Does that mean anything to anyone?”

Just like she had during their first round of interrogation, Rose watched people’s faces as the Doctor posed questions to the group. When he mentioned a child, Lady Eddison’s hand spasmed and she looked away from him, but her husband spoke before Rose could point that out to the Doctor.

“No children in this house for years,” the colonel said. “Highly unlikely there will be,” he added pointedly, casting a sidelong glance at his son, and the footman standing directly behind Roger.

Oh, not such a surprise where Roger’s interest lies after all, Rose mused.

Lady Eddison leaned towards Agatha, who was sitting just opposite her. “Mrs. Christie, you must have twigged something. You’ve written simply the best detective stories.”

Reverend Golightly looked at Agatha over steepled hands. “Tell us, what would Poirot do?”

Agatha looked back at him, then at the rest of the party, staring at her for answers. Her mouth opened and closed once, then she shrugged apologetically.

“Heaven’s sake,” the colonel blustered. “Cards on the Table, woman. You should be helping us.”

Agatha shook her head. “But, I’m merely a writer.”

Miss Redmond leaned towards her and put her hand on her knee. “But surely you can crack it. These events, they’re exactly like one of your plots.”

Donna nodded eagerly. “That’s what I’ve been saying. Agatha, that’s got to mean something.”

“But what?” Agatha countered. “I’ve no answers. None. I’m sorry, all of you.” Her shoulders slumped, and she hung her head. “I’m truly sorry, but I’ve failed. If anyone can help us, then it’s the Doctor and Mrs. Tyler, not me.”

All eyes shifted from Agatha to the Doctor and Rose, and the author took advantage of the momentary inattention to slip out of the room. Donna stood up. “I’ll go talk to her,” she told Rose quietly. “I understand what it’s like, feeling like I’ve failed at life.”

Rose nodded as the colonel and Lady Eddison both demanded answers of the Doctor.

“All right, that’s enough!” she said once Donna was gone. “I understand that you all want answers. You’re scared, of course—this whole day has played out like a Three Act Tragedy, and we’ve only seen the first two acts. But standing around demanding answers of the Doctor only keeps him from doing the actual work of solving the case. If you’ll all just please, go back to what you were doing before, I promise you we will give you any information we uncover.”

The party dispersed with minimal grumbling. As soon as they were alone, Rose smiled brightly at the Doctor. “You were right, Doctor. It is fun using her titles like that.”

His eyes were dark, and when Rose gave him a cheeky wink, he groaned and pulled her close.
Bloody hell, you're sexy when you're being clever, he told her as he bent down to kiss her.

Rose slid her hands over his shoulders and linked them loosely behind his neck. _That would be all the time then, right?_ she teased as she nibbled at his bottom lip.

He chuckled and pulled back to rest his forehead against hers. “Yes, absolutely,” he agreed.

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Donna found Agatha sitting in a gazebo, her head bowed. Flowers were blooming around her, and for a moment, Donna was distracted by the wrongness of seeing roses in December. Then she set that thought aside to mention to the Doctor later.

She stared at the author for a moment, considering what words might convince her that she wasn’t a failure. All she knew of Agatha Christie… _Ah. Yeah, that’ll work._

She sat down and waited for Agatha to look up, then said, “Do you know what I think? Those books of yours, one day they could turn them into films. They could be talking pictures.”

A frown creased Agatha’s forehead. “Talking pictures?” She shook her head. “Pictures that talk? What do you mean?”

**Bloody hell, time travel is complicated.** “Oh, blimey, I’ve done it again.” She’d been sure the switch to talkies happened in the Twenties, but apparently it hadn’t happened yet.

“I appreciate you trying to be kind, but you’re right.” Agatha sighed and stared off into space. “These murders are like my own creations. It’s as though someone’s mocking me, and I’ve had enough scorn for one lifetime.”

That was obviously a reference to her cheating husband, and disappointed love was a subject Donna actually felt fully qualified to talk about.

“Yeah. Thing is, I had this bloke once. I was engaged. And I loved him, I really did.” That was the hardest thing about what had happened. Learning Lance had been conspiring with an alien to poison her couldn’t erase the fact that she’d spent months in love with him. “Turns out he was lying through his teeth. But do you know what? I moved on. I was lucky,” she admitted. “I met the Doctor and Rose—it’s changed my life. There’s always something else.”

“I see.” There were tight lines around Agatha’s mouth. “Is my marriage the stuff of gossip now?”

“No, I just…” Donna suddenly realised how she would have felt if someone she didn’t know came up to her and started talking about Lance, like they knew the whole story. “Sorry.”

Agatha sighed and shook her head. “No matter. The stories are true. I found my husband with another woman. A younger, prettier woman. Isn’t it always the way?”

Donna shrugged. “Well, mine was with a giant spider, but, same difference.”

Agatha actually laughed, finally. “You all talk such wonderful nonsense.”

Donna ignored that. Tempting as it was to argue with the author on the subject of giant insects and arachnids, that wasn’t actually why she’d come after her.

“Agatha, people love your books,” she said, getting to the point finally. “They really do. They’re going to be reading them for years to come.”
Her words seemed to have the opposite effect of what she’d hoped. “If only,” Agatha scoffed. “Try as I might, it’s hardly great literature. No, that’s beyond me.” She drew herself up and took a deep breath. “I’m afraid my books will be forgotten, like ephemera.”

Donna was trying to think of something more encouraging to say when a glint of curiosity crossed the author’s face, and she tilted her head. “Hello, what’s that?” She got to her feet and pointed at a spot in the garden as she strode towards it. “Those flowerbeds were perfectly neat earlier. Now some of the stalks are bent over.” She crouched down in front of the damaged flowers and plucked a small leather case up off the ground.


Agatha tapped her fingers against the case. “I think, Miss Noble, that we need to take this to the Doctor and Rose.”

After everyone left the drawing room, the Doctor, Rose, and Jenny ended up in the small salon. The Doctor pulled the test tube of morphic residue out of his pocket once they were alone.

“I can at least use the sonic screwdriver to analyse this and get some kind of idea about where our murderer comes from,” he said, scanning it with the device as he talked.

“Who is Agatha Christie?” Jenny asked the Doctor and Rose while they waited for results.

Rose nodded at the Doctor, and he grinned and leaned forward in his chair. “One of the most celebrated novelists of all time,” he said. “She writes murder mysteries. Right now, she’s at the beginning of her career, but over the next fifty years, she’ll pen more than a hundred novels, plays, and short stories.”

“Oh,” Jenny said. “So that’s why Donna keeps pointing out how surprising it is that the author is caught in the middle of the kind of story she wrote.”

“Exactly,” Rose agreed. “But it’s happened to us twice, so it’s not really that surprising.”

The sonic beeped, and the Doctor checked the results. “Vespiform?” He leaned back in his chair and tapped his fingers on the arms. “Oh, you’re a long way from home.”

“How far?” Jenny asked.

The door to the sitting room opened before the Doctor could answer, and Agatha and Donna walked in, their eyes bright with excitement. “Doctor,” Agatha said, holding out a leather case, “I think I may have finally been of some use.”

“You know, Agatha,” the Doctor said as he took the case. “You should be easier on yourself. Murder is Easy; solving one is not.”

Rose pressed her lips together to hide her chuckle, and the Doctor winked at her as he flipped back the lid of the case. The first level was full of lock picking tools, and their private teasing was immediately forgotten.

“Oh. Someone came here tooled up,” he said as he revealed the various levels of the tool case. “The sort of stuff a thief would use.”

Agatha put it together first. “The Unicorn. He’s here.”
The Doctor nodded. “The Unicorn and the wasp.”

Greeves entered the room with a tray. “Your drinks, ladies. Doctor.”

Rose handed Jenny the glass of Scotch they’d suggested she try, then took a sip of her sidecar from the tray. “Thank you, Greeves,” she said once everyone had their drink, and the butler nodded once before leaving the room.

“How about the science stuff?” Donna asked quietly. “What did you find?”

The Doctor pulled the test tube out of his pocket again and looked at the bright yellow goo while he sipped at his drink. “Vespiform sting. Vespiforms have got hives in the Silfrax galaxy.”

Agatha shook her head. “Again, you talk like Edward Lear.”

“But for some reason, this one’s behaving like a character in one of your books,” the Doctor said.

Donna kept talking to Agatha, something about Miss Marple, but Rose tuned it out as a faint sense that something was not right with the Doctor grew to fear as he quickly analysed his own body systems.

She set her drink down and moved to his left side while Jenny went to his right. His panic was obvious to both of them over their telepathic connection.

“Dad, are you all right?” Jenny asked. That finally got Donna’s attention, and she and Agatha stopped talking.

“No,” the Doctor said. “Something’s inhibiting my enzymes.” Pain twisted through Rose’s gut when he doubled over. “Argh! I’ve been poisoned.”

The Doctor’s face contorted, and he raised himself halfway out of his seat as his stomach clenched painfully. Feeling his agonising pain terrified Rose; she tended to see him as almost invincible, physically, though logically she knew he could be hurt.

Jenny looked from him to Rose. “We have to do something, Mum. What do we do?”

Agatha picked up his glass and sniffed. “Bitter almonds. It’s cyanide. *Sparkling Cyanide.*”

Anger slowly replaced Rose’s fear as she watched the Doctor stumble to his feet. Someone had poisoned her Doctor—had laced his drink with cyanide, expecting it would kill him. She pressed her lips together and wrapped an arm around his waist. They better hope she never found out who they were.

“Listen to Rose,” the Doctor gasped, before leaning more heavily on her.

Usually, his weight would be almost too much for her, but today, her protective anger gave her extra strength, and she shifted her stance and held him up easily. *What do you need, Doctor?*

*Take me to the kitchen,* he requested, trying to walk and barely managing it. Rose was practically carrying him to the back of the house. *I can stimulate the inhibited enzymes into reversal.*

Rose felt her shoulders relax slightly as some of her fear eased, but her anger was unrelenting. Whoever had poisoned the Doctor obviously hadn’t expected him to be able to fight the cyanide’s effect.

A moment later, they crashed through the kitchen doors. “Ginger beer,” the Doctor gasped, getting
odd looks from the kitchen staff.

Davenport looked at him askance. “I beg your pardon?”

“I need ginger beer,” the Doctor repeated.

Rose spotted a brown bottle on the shelf and they half-ran, half-hobbled over to it.

“The gentleman’s gone mad,” the cook said as the Doctor took a swig of the beverage.

Rose hadn’t considered what the Doctor might want the ginger beer for, but watching him down half the bottle, she had to swallow back her instinctive protests. Ginger typically impaired a Time Lord’s abilities to safely process potentially hazardous substances. Drinking it when he’d been poisoned seemed counterintuitive, but if he claimed that in this instance it would help, she wouldn’t stop him.

But Agatha Christie would. “I’m an expert in poisons,” she said as he poured the rest of the bottle over his head. “Doctor, there’s no cure. It’s fatal.”

Rose’s vision went hazy for a moment with a tinge of gold. She’d been seething with helpless anger from the moment she’d realised the Doctor was in danger, and Agatha’s comments made her an easy target to lash out at.

“One measly attempt at poisoning him isn’t going to kill the Doctor,” she snarled as the Doctor spewed ginger beer onto the kitchen floor. “Now if you can’t say anything more useful, just stand out of the way!”

Agatha blinked, but she shut her mouth.

I need protein, the Doctor told Rose.

“Donna, Jenny, would you two hold him up?” As soon as they were standing on either side of the Doctor, Rose ran to the long counter that ran along the side of the kitchen and rummaged through the drawers.

Behind her, she could hear the Doctor panting as the pain got worse, and she grabbed onto the counter for a moment as it swept over her, too.

She spotted a jar of walnuts and sighed in relief. “Walnuts,” she cried out, scooping the jar up and spinning back around to the Doctor.

He nodded and shoveled a handful into his mouth. Salt next, he told her as he chewed.

She nodded and turned back to the counter. What kind of salt? Her eyes landed on something, and she grabbed it and pushed it at the Doctor even as she wrinkled her nose. Anchovies. You’re not kissing me until you’ve brushed your teeth, she informed the Doctor.

Even though she knew it was necessary, her stomach still rebelled when he tipped the jar up and poured it straight into his mouth. One of the anchovies slipped down his chin onto the floor, and she gagged.

“Anything else, love?”

He nodded as he chewed. I need a shock.

Like an electrical shock? Rose turned in a circle, scanning the kitchen desperately for some source of electricity, but there really wasn’t much. The Doctor slumped against the work top, and Rose shoved
her hands into her hair.

Donna reached out and put her hand on her shoulder. “What is it, Rose?”

“What does Dad need?”

Rose’s chest heaved as her breaths came faster and faster. “He says he needs a shock, but I don’t know how we’re going to do that because this is only nineteen twenty-six and it’s not like they had defibrillators lying around and oh God, Doctor, I’m not ready for you to regenerate yet.” She swiped angrily at the tears in her eyes.

Donna huffed and grabbed her by the shoulders. “Rose! Calm down!” she ordered. Her firm voice cut through some of Rose’s panic, and Donna smiled at her. “That’s better! Now, what can we use to shock him?”

A speculative look crossed her face, but before she could follow through on whatever idea had just crossed her mind, Jenny spoke up.

“Why don’t you just use your sonic screwdriver, Mum?”

Rose blinked. She didn’t know why she hadn’t thought of that—she even knew exactly what setting to use. Setting 1752 would extract the static electricity in the air so the sonic could act as a conduit, passing the charge into whatever the diode happened to be touching.

She pulled her sonic out of her handbag with shaking fingers as she spun around to look at the Doctor. He nodded frantically as she adjusted the setting, and she knew this was the right thing to do.

“Right,” she muttered as she pressed the device to his chest. “Let’s see if this works.” She depressed the button, and a second later, the Doctor’s muscles seized up.

*How long, Doctor?*

She needn’t have worried. After five seconds, he staggered back a few paces before tilting his head back and breathing out a long puff of grey, noxious smoke.

Immediately, the dread the Doctor had been projecting disappeared. “Detox!” he proclaimed cheerfully as he straightened up. “I should do that more often, actually.”

Rose ran a shaky hand through her hair, disrupting the carefully arranged curls. “Yeah, I’d rather not if you don’t mind,” she countered.

“Oh, but you were the best part, Rose Tyler.” The Doctor bounced on his toes and shot her an irrepressible smile. “I’ve always thought loving you struck me like a thunderbolt, but I never figured it would be such a literal thing.”

“Doctor, you are impossible,” Agatha said. “Who are you?”

Rose stared at her bond mate, torn between rolling her eyes at his ridiculous pun and running into his arms. She settled for a smile instead, though relief prompted a tiny giggle as well.

“Can’t you tell?” she asked, letting a cheeky smile creep over her face. “He’s *The Man in the Brown Suit.***

The Doctor looked down at the ginger beer stains on his suit. “Speaking of, I think I need to get cleaned up before dinner. Donna, why don’t you and Jenny stay with Agatha? If the three of you
talk, you might figure something out.”

Donna and Jenny both nodded, and the Doctor turned and held out his hand for Rose. She took it silently, and they walked back to the TARDIS in the fading daylight.
Rose kept the Doctor’s hand firmly clasped in her own as they walked together through the TARDIS. Even though the dress she wanted to wear had been in the wardrobe room that afternoon, she knew it would be waiting for her in their room when they arrived. After their narrow escape with the poison, she wasn’t in any hurry to let the Doctor out of her sight.

The Doctor’s presence sharpened over the bond, comforting Rose. “I’m fine,” he reminded her as he pushed their door open. “Nothing some ginger beer and a jolt of electricity couldn’t cure.”

Rose finally cracked a smile, then grimaced when the Doctor bent down to brush his lips over her forehead. He stank of ginger beer and anchovies. “Get cleaned up,” she directed, pushing him gently towards the ensuite.

He unzipped her dress first, then stripped out of his soiled suit and tossed it in the laundry on his way to take a shower. A moment later, she heard the water turn on, and she turned her attention to her own appearance.

Rose hung the lavender dress up in their wardrobe, then pulled out the crimson flapper evening gown. She loved the teasing feel of the fringed skirt as it brushed against her knees, and she did an experimental turn in front of the mirror, watching it flare out around her legs before settling back down.

Her hair floated back down around her shoulders, and she tilted her head and studied her expression in the mirror, picturing the best ways to twist it up in the current style. A moment later, the incongruity of it all struck her. She was dressing up to go to a murder mystery dinner, except there had been two actual murders.

Remembering how close they’d come to a third murder—well, if you could call it murder if the victim regenerated—her smile disappeared and she sat down at her vanity to do her hair and makeup.

The shower turned off while she was pinning the last twisted strand of hair into place. “So, is this typical behaviour for a Vespiform?” Rose asked when the Doctor entered the room.

“Absolutely not,” he said, his voice certain. He opened the wardrobe and pulled out a clean suit and Oxford. “I’ve been trying to work out what went wrong with this one, actually, because usually they’re peaceful and interact well with other species.”

“Hmmm…” She carefully set a red velvet and rhinestone hairband on her head. “Well, this one certainly isn’t playing well with others.”

The Doctor tucked his shirttails into his trousers and zipped them up, then reached for a tie. “No, it’s not.”

Rose draped a long strand of beads around her neck, then stood up as the Doctor pulled his jacket on. “Let’s go solve a murder mystery, Doctor.” His eyes sparkled, and she laughed with him as she
took his arm.

Night had fallen when the Doctor and Rose walked back to the house, and clouds had rolled in, obscuring the moon. Rose shivered when a cool wind brushed over her bare arms, and the Doctor shrugged out of his jacket and rested it around her shoulders.

“It doesn’t exactly go with that dress you’re wearing,” he said, glancing down at the knee-length red skirt he could still see. “But it’ll keep you warm.”

Rose slid her arm through his. “Thank you, Doctor. So. What’s the plan?”

“I’m going to nip down to the kitchen once we’re inside and make a slight amendment to dinner,” he told her. “Then we’ll see what happens from there.”

Greeves blinked when they appeared at the front door, and the Doctor took advantage of the butler’s momentary confusion to slip away after Rose handed his jacket back. It was a bit harder to sneak into the kitchen and dump pepper into the soup, but eventually, he achieved his goal. Piperine was toxic to insectoid lifeforms all over the universe, including the Vespiform. Now all that remained was to see who reacted when they learned they’d been poisoned.

He returned to the main floor just in time to follow Jenny into the dining room. To his surprise, she gave him a quick hug and whispered, “I’m so glad you’re all right.” The Doctor looked over her head at Rose as he squeezed Jenny in return. The notion that he actually had a family hadn’t quite set in, but moments like this kept reminding him.

A bolt of lightning lit the night sky as the footmen served the soup, punctuated by a crash of thunder, and the Doctor took that as his cue to begin. “A terrible day for all of us. The Professor struck down, Miss Chandrakala taken cruelly from us, and yet we still take dinner.”

“We are British, Doctor,” Lady Eddison said quellingly, a glass of wine in one hand. “What else must we do?”

Rose snorted. “Easy for you to say, your ladyship. No one tried to poison your husband this afternoon.” Lady Eddison flushed, but offered no apology.

The Doctor reached for Rose’s hand under the tablecloth and squeezed gently. “Quite right, Rose,” he agreed. “Although that did give me an idea.”

The vicar paused. “And what would that be?”


He watched with barely controlled amusement when spoons stopped in mid-air as those words sunk in. Even Jenny and Donna looked uncertain, while Rose was trying to conceal her smile.

After letting the words linger, unexplained, he added, “I’ve laced the soup with pepper.” The sighs of relief were audible, and the Doctor paid attention to who started eating again.

“Ah, I thought it was jolly spicy,” Colonel Curbishley said jovially.

Seated just the other side of Rose, Roger was still staring at his soup. The Doctor narrowed his eyes and focused on the young peer.

“But the active ingredient of pepper is piperine, traditionally used as an insecticide.” He looked away from Roger and scanned the rest of the room. “So, anyone got the shivers?”
Thunder crashed and a gust of wind blew the windows open, extinguishing the candles and plunging the room into shadow. Although it added to the atmosphere of the moment, it made it quite a bit harder to see who had stopped eating.

And underneath the sound of the storm…

“What the deuce is that?” the colonel demanded.

“Listen, listen, listen, listen,” the Doctor insisted, pointing his finger at the ceiling. If you listened closely, you could hear a faint buzzing mixed in with the wind.

“No, it can’t be.”

The Doctor’s eyes widened and he looked at Lady Eddison, illuminated in stark relief by a bolt of lightning. She was staring up at the ceiling, and the expression in her wide eyes resembled recognition more than shock or confusion.

*How could she know what that sound is?*

Something about the whole scenario bothered him, but before he could work out what it was, Agatha stood up and turned towards the buzzing.

“Show yourself, demon.”

Her challenge seemed to spur everyone into action, and the Doctor groaned as he lost track of who was where—and more importantly, who was still human and who was not.

“Nobody move,” he ordered uselessly. “No, don’t! Stay where you are.”

Another flash of lightning revealed the murderer in their midst, buzzing in midair in front of the window. The Doctor’s strategy shifted when the danger was evident, and he waved at the crowd, encouraging them to take cover.

“Out, out, out, out, out!” he cried. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Greeves usher Donna and Jenny into the butler’s pantry. He reached for Rose, but she’d already stood up and tugged Roger to his feet.

“Come on, Roger,” she shouted as they followed the butler’s example.

The Doctor took Agatha by the elbow and pushed her into the crowded space.

“I say!” Roger tugged his arm free and straightened his dinner jacket. “Was it really necessary to manhandle me like that, Mrs. Tyler?”

Rose put her hands on her hips. “Oi! I could’ve let you get murdered, if you’d rather?”

They could still hear buzzing out in the dining room, and Rose grabbed Agatha’s wrist and pulled her back when she stepped towards the door. “Does everyone want to die?” she asked acerbically as the Doctor pulled a sword from the wall. “This is part of the Doctor’s plan to reveal the murderer’s true identity. Let him work.”

Donna pointed her thumb over her shoulder at Greeves. “Well, we know the butler didn’t do it.”

“Then who did?” the Doctor asked as he unsheathed the sword and led the way back into the dining room.
The first thing Rose noticed was that the buzzing had stopped. The second thing was Colonel Curbishley, lying on his side in front of his overturned wheelchair. She tipped the chair back up, then lifted the older man back into it with the vicar’s help.

The electric lights came back on as they worked, and Rose was relieved to be able to see everyone clearly when she turned back around.

At the head of the table, Lady Eddison clutched at her necklaces as she reached for her drink, but suddenly her eyes widened and she put both her hands to her chest.


Something else had caught Rose’s eye. “I think you’re lucky that’s all you lost,” she said, pointing at the Roger’s place at the table.

Gasps filled the room. The plate was broken, and a sharp kitchen knife pierced the table.

“Oh well… I…”

Rose glanced up at Roger, whose face was now as white as his cravat. “You should go lie down,” she told him sympathetically. Roger blinked at her, then nodded slowly and shuffled towards the door.

“Oi, what’s your name?” Donna gestured at the footman. “Davenport, right? Well, Davenport, why don’t you go with him, make sure there’s nothing he needs?”

A grateful smile stretched across Davenport’s face, and he was halfway to the door before he realised he hadn’t gotten permission from his actual employers. When he turned around, Lady Eddison was still clutching her beaded necklace and staring at the table in disbelief, so his gaze swung to the colonel instead.

The colonel’s features tightened, but he waved towards the door. “Might as well let you go—you’ll be useless for anything else if I don’t.” Davenport didn’t need any further invitation, and he was gone in an instant.

“That’s not entirely cricket, is it?” Reverend Golightly said. “After all, we still haven’t figured out who the murderer is, and until we do, everyone is a suspect.”

Jenny pointed at the large chef knife protruding from the table. “I think Roger was the next intended victim, which would mean he can’t be the murderer,” she pointed out.

“Excellent point, Jenny,” the Doctor agreed.

“Unless he purposely did that to eliminate suspicion,” the reverend pressed.

Rose shook her head. “Of all of you, Roger was the only one who had an alibi for the time of Professor Peach’s murder. Not to mention, he was with us in the butler’s pantry.”

The Doctor stepped forward before the reverend could argue further. “You do have a point, however,” he said. “There’s still a murderer at large. Why don’t we all reconvene in the drawing room in ten minutes? I think it’s time we got to the bottom of this.”

Once dismissed, the party left the dining room quickly, not keen to be so close to an attempted murder scene. The Doctor raised his eyebrows at Rose, but she shook her head and sat down beside the still-trembling Lady Eddison.
The Doctor nodded, then gestured to the door. “Shall we, ladies?” he said to Agatha, Jenny, and Donna.

A flash of lightning blinded him for a moment when they reached the drawing room. The storm outside matched his tumultuous mood. His plan to unmask the killer had backfired—if it hadn’t been for Rose’s quick thinking, they would have had another dead body on their hands instead.

“We must figure this out, Doctor.” Agatha sat down on the couch and stared into space over her clasped hands. “Two murders, and a third attempted, and we are no closer to unmasking the killer.”

“I know,” the Doctor said sharply, then repeated it, his voice softer. “I know.”

He put his hands in his pockets and rocked back on his heels in front of the fireplace. There was something he was missing…

“Well, I’m glad Roger didn’t die, for Davenport’s sake,” Donna said. “At least at the end of all this, they’ll still have each other.”

The Doctor nodded absently, his mind already on other details. “This thing can sting. It could wipe us all out in seconds. Why is it playing this game?”

“Every murder is essentially the same,” Agatha explained, and the Doctor looked over at her. If anyone could make sense of murder, it was Agatha Christie. “They are committed because somebody wants something.”

Rose slipped into the room before he could ask what a Vespiform would want. “Lady Eddison is taking some of her tonic, then everyone should be here in ten minutes.”

“Did you enquire after the necklace?” Agatha asked.

Rose joined the Doctor by the fireplace, and he automatically wrapped an arm around her waist. “Lady Eddison bought it back from India. It’s worth thousands.”

*India.* Everything centred on Lady Eddison’s trip to India, but there was still something just out of reach.

Rose looked up at him. “Have you figured something out, Doctor?”

“Almost.” He ran his hand through his hair. “So, Lady Eddison went to India several years ago.”

“Forty,” Rose supplied. “That’s what she told me, at least.”

“That’s what Greeves said too,” Donna added.

The Doctor took a breath to rein in his impatience at being interrupted. “All right. Forty years ago, Lady Eddison returned from India, indisposed, and quarantined herself in a room until she recovered.”

To his surprise, a sudden flash of understanding hit Rose, and he watched as she, Donna, and Agatha exchanged a speaking glance. “What?” he demanded. “What is it?”

“Oh, she didn’t quarantine herself, Doctor,” Agatha corrected. “She was confined until she gave birth.”

Jenny opened her mouth, but Rose shook her head before she could ask the innocent question she could see on the tip of her tongue. They could explain twentieth century morality and cultural norms
The Doctor stared unblinking at them for a long moment, processing that fact and fitting it in with what he already knew. “So the paper, the one that said maiden…”

“Birth certificate,” Agatha confirmed. “I didn’t put it together myself until you said she came home indisposed.”

The Doctor thought quickly. Agatha had said murders were committed because someone wanted something, and wanting revenge after being abandoned as a baby was certainly a valid motive. But who… He did the maths and landed on the answer in seconds. If Lady Eddison’s child was forty years old, then the vicar was the only possible suspect. He reviewed their first meeting with the vicar and nodded—the vicar who had been raised in an orphanage, of course.

“Right.” The Doctor crossed the room to sit down across from Agatha. A plan was rapidly forming in his mind, but he couldn’t execute it by himself. “Then I think I know who the murderer is, but we’ll need your help to expose them, Agatha. Because you’re the expert when it comes to slowly unveiling the secrets of a group of suspects.”

Agatha glared at him and shook her head firmly. “I’m not. I told you. I’m just a purveyor of nonsense.” She rested her chin on her hand in a posture of defeat.

“No, no, no, no, no, no, no.” The Doctor shifted closer to her. “Plenty of people write detective stories, but yours are the best. And why? Why are you so good, Agatha Christie? Because you understand. You’ve lived, you’ve fought, you’ve had your heart broken. You know about people.” A glimmer of curiosity broke through Agatha’s downcast expression, and he knew she was already writing the scene in her mind, thinking about how they could reveal the killer. “Their passions, their hope, and despair, and anger. All of those tiny, huge things that can turn the most ordinary person into a killer. Just think, Agatha. We need a classic denouement, a la Poirot, and no one writes those better than you.”

Agatha straightened up and looked at the Doctor, her blue eyes bright and confident. “You want me to reveal the secrets of this house, the way Poirot would?”

“Yes!”

She nodded. “Then let us begin. The stage is set; bring in the players.”

As if on cue, the door opened and Greeves wheeled in Colonel Curbishley, followed by Lady Eddison, Reverend Golightly, and Miss Redmond. Rose, Donna, and Jenny sat down to the right of the fireplace while the Doctor paced in front of it.

“I’ve called you here on this Endless Night because we have a murderer in our midst,” he began once everyone was situated. With all eyes on him, he raised his eyebrows dramatically, then threw them a googly, turning suddenly and pointing to Agatha. “And when it comes to detection, there’s none finer. Ladies and gentlemen, I give you, Agatha Christie.”

The Doctor sat down in the empty spot on the couch beside Rose and let Agatha take centre stage in front of the fireplace. She paced once, then turned on the guests, her face set with determination.

“This is a Crooked House. A house of secrets.”

The Doctor watched the members of the party squirm under Agatha’s knowing gaze. Lady Eddison especially fidgeted with her glass when secrets were mentioned, and he nodded slightly.
“To understand the solution, we must examine them all,” Agatha continued. “Starting with you, Miss Redmond,” she said, turning away from Lady Eddison at the last moment to look at the youngest member of the party.

All eyes turned towards Miss Redmond, filled with surprise and suspicion. The Doctor frowned; what secrets did Agatha think the young socialite was hiding?

_I told you she was lying about something earlier, remember?_ Rose reminded him.

Miss Redmond fidgeted with a game piece she’d picked up from the bridge table. “But I’m innocent, surely?” she said, her voice a little too bright.

Agatha raised an eyebrow and tilted her head. “You’ve never met these people, and these people have never met you. I think the real Robina Redmond never left London. You’re impersonating her.”

Panic flared in Miss Redmond’s eyes, and she shifted in her seat. “How silly. What proof do you have?” she challenged.

A ghost of a smile crossed Agatha’s face. “You said you’d been to the toilet.”

“Oh, I know this,” Donna said. “If she was really posh, she’d say loo.”

Agatha ignored Donna and picked up the lock pick case from the coffee table. The Doctor groaned softly. Of course—he’d forgotten all about the Unicorn in the middle of figuring out the wasp.

“Earlier today, Miss Noble and I found this on the lawn, right beneath your bathroom window.”

Miss Redmond turned away from Agatha and the damning evidence and took a sip of her wine. “You must have heard that Miss Noble was searching the bedrooms, so you panicked. You ran upstairs and disposed of the evidence.”

“I’ve never seen that thing before in my life.”

The Doctor had to admire her determination to brazen the situation out, even though her guilt was obvious to everyone in the room.

“What’s inside it?” Lady Eddison asked.

Agatha opened the case and showed the tools to everyone. “The tools of your trade, Miss Redmond. Or should I say, the Unicorn.”

Gasps filled the room, and even though the Doctor had asked Agatha to run the show for exactly this reason, he still marveled at her ability to reveal the secrets, one at a time. She held the room in the palm of her hand, and she didn’t even realise it.

“You came to this house with one sole intention. To steal the Firestone.”

“Oh, all right then,” Miss Redmond—or whatever her name was—said, a Cockney accent coming through her practiced posh voice. “It’s a fair cop. Yes, I’m the bleeding Unicorn.” She stood up and sauntered across the room, glaring at all of them. “Ever so nice to meet you, I don’t think. I took my chance in the dark and nabbed it.” She pulled the Firestone out of her bra, then looked at the Doctor. “Go on then, you knobs. Arrest me. Sling me in jail.” She tossed the necklace across the room at the Doctor, then put her hands on her hips and lifted her chin defiantly.

_Why’d she throw it at me?_ he wondered as he caught the stone.
"So, is she the murderer?" Jenny asked.

"Don’t be so thick." The Unicorn leaned against the back of Colonel Curbishley’s chair and scowled at them. “I might be a thief, but, well, I ain’t no killer.”

"Quite," Agatha agreed. “There are darker motives at work. And in examining this household, we come to you, Colonel.”

Again, she shifted her gaze from Lady Eddison to her true quarry at the last moment, and the Doctor shook his head in admiration. Each time she stared at her ladyship, the older woman’s poise slipped a little bit further. He looked at the colonel, wondering what Agatha had sussed out about him.

Curbishley cast a frantic gaze at his wife, who looked back at him with wide eyes. “Damn it, woman,” he growled at Agatha. “You with your perspicacity. You’ve rumbled me.” He put his hands on the arms of his wheelchair and stood, without a hint of difficulty.

“Hugh!” Lady Eddison gasped. “You can walk. But why?”

Curbishley smiled sadly at her and took her hand. “My darling, how else could I be certain of keeping you by my side?”

She shook her head. “I don’t understand.”

“You’re still a beautiful woman, Clemency. Sooner or later some chap will turn your head. I couldn’t bear that.”

Lady Eddison pressed his hand to her forehead, and the Doctor rather thought the colonel hadn’t given his wife enough credit—though he could certainly relate to the belief that his wife deserved far better than him.

Rose poked him in the side. Stop it, she ordered, and he smiled and shrugged sheepishly.

“Staying in the chair was the only way I could be certain of keeping you,” the colonel concluded. “Confound it, Mrs. Christie.” He pulled his hand away from Lady Eddison and wheeled on Agatha. “How did you discover the truth?”

Agatha shook her head slightly. “Um… Actually, I had no idea. I was just going to say you’re completely innocent.”

“Oh.” The colonel gaped at her.

“Sorry,” Agatha apologised, in that awkward British way of apologising for things that were not their fault.

“Well. Well, shall I sit down then?” Curbishley asked.

Agatha nodded. “I think you better had.”

“So he’s not the murderer,” Donna stated.

“Indeed, not.”
The Doctor thought the moment had finally come, and he handed over the Firestone. A glimmer of a smile appeared on Agatha’s face as she took it from him.

“To find the truth, let’s return to this.” She held it up and the gem at the centre of the heart-shaped locket flashed with purple fire. “Far more than the Unicorn’s object of desire. The Firestone has quite a history. Lady Eddison.”

The Doctor dropped his chin and studied her ladyship, noticing the trembling hands wrapped around the glass tumbler.

“I’ve done nothing,” the lady insisted, her voice breathless.

“You brought it back from India, did you not? Before you met the Colonel.”

Lady Eddison’s eyes watered before she closed them, and a pang of sympathy flashed over the bond from Rose. The Doctor squeezed her hand. *There’s no way to catch the killer without exposing her secrets,* he told her regretfully, and she nodded.

Agatha continued, relentless. “You came home with malaria, and confined yourself to this house for six months, in a room that has been kept locked ever since, which I rather think means…”

Lady Eddison set her glass down on the table. “Stop, please,” she begged, her voice thick with tears.

“I’m so sorry,” Agatha said sincerely. “But you had fallen pregnant in India. Unmarried and ashamed, you hurried back to England with your confidante, a young maid later to become housekeeper. Miss Chandrakala.”

A ripple of shock had gone through the colonel when Agatha revealed his wife’s secret, and finally, he found his voice. “Clemency, is this true?”

Lady Eddison shook her head and her throat moved as she swallowed back tears. “My poor baby. I had to give him away. The shame of it.”

“But you never said a word,” her husband protested.

“I had no choice.” Lady Eddison picked up her glass again, but her hands were shaking so badly that the ice clinked against the side of the glass. “Imagine the scandal. The family name. I’m British. I carry on.”

The Doctor watched her take a drink, and he knew it was his turn. “And it was no ordinary pregnancy.”

Lady Eddison’s eyes widened. “How can you know that?” she whispered.

“Excuse me Agatha, this is my territory.” He looked up at Agatha quickly, and she nodded. Then he looked back at Lady Eddison. “But when you heard that buzzing sound in the dining room, you said, ‘It can’t be.’ Why did you say that?”

She shook her head. “You’d never believe it.”

“The Doctor has opened my mind to believe many things,” Agatha said as she sat down.

Lady Eddison took a deep breath and started her story. “It was forty years ago, in the heat of Delhi, late one night. I was alone, and that’s when I saw it. A dazzling light in the sky.”

The Doctor nodded; that would have been the Vespiform’s ship, breaking atmosphere.
“The next day, he came to the house. Christopher, the most handsome man I’d ever seen. Our love blazed like a wildfire. I held... nothing back,” she said, delicately referring to the intimate relationship that had obviously developed between herself and the Vespiform. She took a drink to compose herself before continuing the story. “And in return he showed me the incredible truth about himself. He’d made himself human, to learn about us. This was his true shape.”

“He was a Vespiform—a human-sized wasp,” the Doctor stated, and she nodded.

“I loved him so much, it didn’t matter,” Lady Eddison said, near tears again. “But he was stolen from me. Eighteen eighty-five, the year of the great monsoon. The river Jumna rose up and broke its banks. He was *Taken at the Flood*. But Christopher left me a parting gift.” She gestured to the necklace Agatha still held. “A jewel like no other. I wore it always. Part of me never forgot. I kept it close, always.” Her tears finally overflowed.

Miss Redmond snorted derisively. “Just like a man. Flashes his family jewels and you end up with a bun in the oven.”

The Doctor cast a sidelong gaze at Reverend Golightly, who appeared slightly ill at the story behind his own conception.

“A poor little child,” Agatha said, repeating Miss Chandrakala’s dying words. “Forty years ago, Miss Chandrakala took that newborn babe to an orphanage. But Professor Peach worked it out. He found the birth certificate.”

“So she killed him?” Jenny asked.

“I did not,” Lady Eddison said indignantly, her voice throbbing with tears.

“Miss Chandrakala feared that the Professor had unearthed your secret,” Agatha continued. “She was coming to warn you.”

“So she killed her,” Donna guessed, and Rose’s shoulders started shaking from repressed laughter at the commentary coming from their two travelling companions.

“I did not,” Lady Eddison repeated.

“Lady Eddison is innocent,” Agatha said, ending that line of questioning at last. Lady Eddison heaved a shuddering breath, and Agatha turned to the Doctor. “Because at this point, Doctor…”

Rose leaned back against the couch to watch as the Doctor jumped to his feet and started pacing in front of the fireplace. He was all manic energy as he switched into lecture mode, and oh, she loved it when he was like this.

“Thank you. At this point, when we consider the lies and the secrets, and the key to these events, then we have to consider”—He pivoted and pointed at Donna—“it was you, Donna Noble.”

Donna nearly spat out one of the nuts she’d been eating. “What? Who did I kill?”

Rose’s amusement finally broke forth in a few stifled chuckles. She turned to look at Donna and Jenny, who were both watching the proceedings with wide eyes. “No, Donna. It’s you who’s pointed out the vital clue, right from the start. This whole thing is being acted out like a murder mystery.”

“Exactly,” the Doctor agreed, turning to Agatha as he spoke. “Which means it was you, Agatha Christie.”
Agatha stared at his pointing finger. “I beg your pardon, sir?”

“I don’t think she killed them,” argued Jenny.

The Doctor nodded. “No, she didn’t. But she wrote. She wrote those brilliant, clever books. And who’s her greatest admirer? *The Moving Finger* points at you, Lady Eddison.”

“Don’t. Leave me alone.” Lady Eddison took another sip of her drink and cowered in her corner of the couch.

Rose raised her hand before either Jenny or Donna could comment. “No. She didn’t kill them. Just listen.”

The Doctor smiled at Rose, then looked back at Lady Eddison. “Last Thursday night, what were you doing?”

“I was…” Lady Eddison sniffed. “I was in the library. I was reading my favourite Agatha Christie, thinking about her plots, and how clever she must be. How is that relevant?” she asked as she set down her crystal tumbler.

“Just think,” the Doctor prodded. “What else happened on Thursday night?”

There was a lull in the conversation while the Doctor turned towards Reverend Golightly and waited for him to realise he was the focus of his attention now.

The vicar blinked. “I’m sorry?”

“You said on the lawn, this afternoon. Last Thursday night, those boys broke into your church.”

“That’s correct.” The vicar nodded. “They did. I discovered the two of them. Thieves in the night. I was most perturbed. But I apprehended them.”

“Really?” The Doctor raised an eyebrow and looked down at the man, skepticism pouring off him. “A man of God against two strong lads? A man in his forties? Or, should I say forty years old, exactly.”

“Oh, my God.” Lady Eddison gasped as she looked at her son for the first time.

“Lady Eddison, your child, how old would he be now?” the Doctor asked.

She tore her gaze away from the vicar to nod at the Doctor. “Forty. He’s forty.”

“Your child has come home.”

The vicar was squirming under the scrutiny of the whole group. “Oh, this is poppycock,” he insisted, but his laughter was forced.

“Oh?” The Doctor rocked back on his heels, then bounced lightly on his toes. “You said you were taught by the Christian Fathers, meaning you were raised in an orphanage.”

Lady Eddison stared at the vicar, someone she’d welcomed into her house without even knowing who he was to her. “My son. Can it be?”

The lines around the vicar’s mouth tightened, and the Doctor glanced at Rose. She nodded once and slid further down the couch, away from the Vespiform.
He looked back at the vicar then and pressed his point. “You found those thieves, Reverend, and you got angry.” The Doctor stepped towards the vicar as he launched into the full explanation of what had happened Thursday night. “A proper, deep anger, for the first time in your life, and it broke the genetic lock.”

The tension on the vicar’s face eased, but to the Doctor’s trained eye, he looked like a man resolved to stay his course, not one who had decided to give it up. Be ready to run, Rose, he told her, glancing from her to Jenny and Donna sitting behind her. All three of them nodded, and he turned back to the vicar, the entire exchange having taken barely five seconds.

“You changed,” he continued. “You realised your inheritance. After all these years, you knew who you were.” He spun around and picked up the Firestone. “Oh, and then it all kicks off, because this isn’t just a jewel. It’s a Vespiform telepathic recorder.”

The vicar’s gaze focused on the stone, a frown furrowing his brow. The Doctor walked closer to the door as he waved the stone around, hoping to push the vicar into changing, but also hoping to keep his attention focused on himself, so the rest of the party would be safe.

“It’s part of you, your brain, your very essence. And when you activated, so did the Firestone. It beamed your full identity directly into your mind.” He leaned down on the back of the couch. “And, at the same time, it absorbed the works of Agatha Christie directly from Lady Eddison. It all became part of you. The mechanics of those novels formed a template in your brain. You’ve killed, in this pattern, because that’s what you think the world is.”

The Doctor walked around the corner of the couch and sat down on the end table. “It turns out, we are in the middle of a murder mystery.” He looked at the author. “One of yours, Dame Agatha.”

“Dame?” she repeated, and the Doctor remembered they were still at the beginning of her career, long before she received honours.

“Oh. Sorry, not yet.”

“So he killed them, yes?” Donna asked.

“Definitely?” Jenny added.

The Doctor nodded. “Yes.”

Anger blazed in the vicar’s eyes, but he managed to keep his voice even. “Well, this has certainly been a most entertaining evening.”

No one shared the vicar’s pathetic attempt at laughter, and Lady Eddison in particular looked at her son with mute horror.

The vicar swallowed and shook his head. “Really, you can’t believe any of this surely, Lady Edizzon.”

The Doctor stood up and took a step towards the vicar. “Lady who?”

Irritation flashed in his eyes. “Lady Edizzzzonz.”

“Little bit of buzzing there, Vicar,” the Doctor said, pointing at his own throat.

“Don’t make me angry.” The vicar stood up and moved to stand behind the couch.
You wouldn’t like me when I’m angry. Rose and the Doctor shared a smile when the thought came to them at the same time.

“Why? What happens then?” the Doctor challenged.

While the vicar let go of all his self-control, Rose carefully got up and motioned for Jenny and Donna to come stand with her in front of the fireplace. If she was right about what was going to happen next, they would want some space between themselves and the killer.

“Damn it, you humans,” he spat out, his Ss turning to buzzing sounds, “worshipping your tribal sky gods. I am so much more. That night, the universe exploded in my mind. I wanted to take what was mine. And you, Agatha Christie, with your railway station bookstall romances, what’s to stop me killing you?”

Lady Eddison reached for the vicar as a purple glow spread across his face, clearly recognising the early stages of transformation from her time with Christopher. “Oh, my dear God. My child.”

“What’s to stop me killing you all?” A cloud of purple smoke veiled the vicar for a moment, and when it dissipated, he had transformed into his wasp form. The buzzing was the only sound he made now, and his wings flapped furiously.

“Forgive me,” Lady Eddison sobbed, reaching for her son.

Colonel Curbishley grabbed her and pulled her back, with the assistance of Greeves. “No, no, Clemency, come back. Keep away.” The two men shielded her with their own bodies, staring the Vespiform down with fear in their eyes. “Keep away, my darling.”

Rose didn’t protest when the Doctor shifted to put his body between the Vespiform and herself, Donna, and Jenny. How are we going to take care of it in this form, Doctor? she asked as the wasp floated over the couch.

It was Agatha who spoke, though. “No. No more murder.” She held the Firestone over her head. “If my imagination made you kill, then my imagination will find a way to stop you, foul creature.” She turned and ran from the room.

Well, not like that, the Doctor said as they ran after her, the Vespiform hot on their heels. What’s she thinking?

Oh, you know, Rose told him, taking his hand as they ran down the hallway. She’s feeling guilty for something that isn’t her fault.

“Wait, now it’s chasing us,” Donna shouted as they rounded the corner by the stairs and spotted the open door. They all sped up and burst out into the open air, where it was thankfully not storming any longer.

“Close it, close it!” Jenny panted as she and Donna pulled the doors shut.

“That’s not going to hold it,” Rose muttered as they ran towards the drive, looking for Agatha.

A horn caught their attention, and Agatha drove by in a shiny car. “Over here!” she shouted as the Vespiform broke through the doors, buzzing outside after them. “Come and get me, Reverend.”

“Agatha, what are you doing?” the Doctor shouted, looking from the author to the murderer and back.
Agatha shook her head. “If I started this, Doctor, then I must stop it.” She drove off before he could protest further, and after only a moment of hesitation, the Vespiform followed her, clearly deciding she was his true objective that night.

The Doctor gritted his teeth. “You’re right, Rose,” he admitted. “That’s… that’s really annoying.” He spun around and spotted another car. “Come on.” The four of them climbed into the automobile and followed after Agatha and the Vespiform.

“You said this is the night Agatha Christie loses her memory,” Donna pointed out.

Rose shook her head quickly. “Time is in flux, Donna.”

“Exactly,” the Doctor agreed. “For all we know, this is the night Agatha Christie loses her life and history gets changed.”

“What’s she doing?” Jenny asked.

Up ahead, Agatha took a turn marked ‘Silent Pool.’ “The lake,” the Doctor said. “She’s heading for the lake. What’s she doing?”

Beside him, Rose stiffened, and the Doctor looked over at her. Something about the setting had triggered a memory, but she hadn’t put her finger on what it was yet.

When they reached the lake, Agatha had already gotten out of her car and was holding the Firestone over her head. “Here I am, the honey in the trap.” She waved the stone back and forth, and the Vespiform swayed slightly in midair, tracking the movements of the stone. “Come to me, Vespiform.”

“She’s controlling it,” Donna realised.

The Doctor jumped out of the car and ran towards the shore and Agatha. “Its mind is based on her thought processes. They’re linked.” He looked from the stone to the Vespiform.

“Quite so, Doctor.” Agatha’s voice was eerily calm. “If I die, then this creature might die with me.”

Comprehension swept over Rose. *You said Agatha’s car was discovered by a lake,* she told him. *This is it—this is what causes her to lose her memories.*

He nodded to show that he understood what she was telling him, then he looked at the Vespiform. If it would just… stop killing, they could take it back to the Silfrax galaxy where it belonged. “Don’t hurt her,” he shouted, darting in between the wasp and Agatha Christie. “You’re not meant to be like this. You’ve got the wrong template in your mind.”

Donna eyed the wasp carefully, but the creature didn’t seem to be swayed by the Doctor’s argument. “It’s not listening to you.” She thought back to the story Lady Eddison had told, then she snatched the Firestone out of Agatha’s hand and threw it into the lake. Someone was going to die tonight, and it wasn’t fair for it to be Agatha, who still had sixty novels left to write.

The Vespiform buzzed over their heads and dove into the lake after the jewel. It disappeared beneath the surface, and the water bubbled and frothed with purple light.

Donna sighed and nodded. “How do you kill a wasp? Drown it, just like his father.”

The Doctor looked at her, the stark lines of his face making his wide eyes stand out. “Donna, that thing couldn’t help itself.”
Donna looked up at the Doctor, hardly able to believe his protest. Did he actually think they should have let Agatha sacrifice herself? If it had been Rose holding that pendant, he wouldn’t have hesitated to take it and throw it in himself.

“What was she supposed to do, Dad?” Jenny countered, before Donna could say a word. “It was the only way to save Agatha.”

After a moment, his shoulders slumped and he nodded. Donna smiled gratefully at Jenny, then they all looked back at the lake.

“Death Comes as the End,” Agatha said solemnly, “and justice is served.”

“Murder at the Vicar’s Rage,” the Doctor mused. Rose and Donna groaned, and he shrugged his shoulders. “Needs a bit of work.”

“Just one mystery left, Doctor.” Agatha turned and looked up at him. “Who exactly are you?”

Before he could come up with some kind of answer she might believe, Agatha doubled over, one hand on her back and the other clutching her stomach. The Doctor caught her before she could fall, then glared out at the water.

“Oh, it’s the Firestone,” he said through gritted teeth. “It’s part of the Vespiform’s mind. It’s dying and it’s connected to Agatha.”

Donna looked frantically from the author she admired so much out at the lake, hoping that something would happen to save her life. Agatha glowed purple for a few moments, and Donna had almost given up when Agatha Christie slumped back into the Doctor’s arms, unconscious. The light and bubbling in the lake stopped, too, and she suspected the Vespiform had met its watery end.

An owl hooted into the eerie silence, and Jenny crossed her arms over her chest and rubbed her hands over her arms. “What just happened?” she asked.

“He let her go,” the Doctor explained. “Right at the end, the Vespiform chose to save someone’s life.”

“And now we know how she got amnesia.” A gust of wind blew a hair into Rose’s face, and she pushed it back over her ear before continuing. “The trauma of the brief connection and near death wiped her mind of everything that happened.”

The Doctor nodded. “The wasp, the murders.”

Donna sighed. “And us. She’ll forget about us.”

“Yeah, but we’ve solved another riddle,” the Doctor said, smiling his cheer-up smile. “The mystery of Agatha Christie. And tomorrow morning, her car gets found by the side of a lake. A few days later, she turns up in hotel at Harrogate with no idea of what just happened. No one’ll ever know.”

“Hmmm… I wonder how she gets to Harrogate when her car is still here?” Rose mused, a smile on her face as she tapped her finger against her chin.

“Back to the TARDIS then?” Jenny suggested, the first to climb back into the car.

“Back to the TARDIS,” the Doctor agreed as he carried the unconscious mystery novelist to the car and placed her carefully in the backseat.
Twenty minutes later, they landed outside a posh hotel in Harrogate. The Doctor set Agatha down on a bench and pressed a hypospray to her neck.

The medicine woke her up right away, and she quickly scanned her surroundings. Fear crossed her face when she didn’t recognise them, and Donna felt a pang of remorse that they couldn’t explain things to her. But she’d been lectured about changing timelines enough times to know not to suggest it.

“Where am I?” Agatha asked. “How did I get here? Who are you?”

The Doctor slipped his hands into his coat pockets. “I’m afraid I can’t answer the first two,” he said honestly. “We were just taking a stroll when we spotted you and realised you were asleep. My wife,” he nodded at Rose, “insisted we stay until you woke up.”

Agatha turned to Rose. “Thank you. I don’t… I wish…”

Rose pointed to the hotel behind them. “I’m sure there’s someone in there who could help you,” she suggested. “Maybe they have a telephone you could use to call someone.”

The lines tightened around Agatha’s mouth, and Donna realised she must still remember about her husband.

“Thank you,” the author said stiffly, getting to her feet. “I appreciate all you’ve done, but I must… I need to make some calls.”

They nodded, and once she’d gone a few steps, they walked back to the TARDIS, which was only fifteen feet away, parked in a tree-lined avenue.

Donna was the first to turn around to watch Agatha leave, and then everyone else did. Watching the woman she’d befriended in the course of the day walk away, dazed and confused, was one of the hardest things she’d ever done. She wouldn’t make it worse by making Agatha think they didn’t really care about her at all.

Agatha reached the stone steps leading to the hotel and glanced back at them. They nodded once, and she shook her head, then climbed the stairs and walked out of their lives.

“But there’s one thing I don’t understand, Dad,” Jenny said as they turned to leave for the final time. “You said Agatha Christie’s disappearance was a huge mystery, but all those people were there.”

Donna nodded quickly. “That’s right. Why didn’t Lady Eddison, or the Colonel, or any of the staff say anything?” She pursed her lips. “Never mind the staff,” she said immediately. “They were probably afraid they’d get the sack. But everyone else?”

Rose snorted. “You’re forgetting, Donna. They’re aristocracy. Lady Eddison went forty years without telling anyone she had a son—do you think she’s going to admit that her son was a half-wasp alien creature who committed two murders?”

The Doctor nodded. “And the Unicorn does a bunk back to London town. She can never even say she was there.”

Donna sighed. It figured that everything would wrap up nice and tight. “What happens to Agatha?”

“Oh, great life,” the Doctor assured her. “Met another man, married again. Saw the world. Wrote and wrote and wrote.”
Out of the corner of her eye, Donna saw Rose unlock the TARDIS and follow Jenny inside. She wasn’t quite ready to go yet though, and the Doctor seemed to understand.

“She never thought her books were any good, though. And she must have spent all those years wondering.”

The Doctor wrapped an arm around Donna’s shoulders and hugged her briefly. “Most authors I meet feel that way,” he said quietly. “Genre authors especially, since for some reason, you humans have this notion that mysteries and romance novels and science fiction don’t matter as much as the so-called literary fiction.”

He turned towards the open TARDIS doors, grateful that Donna allowed herself to be led. Rose was showing Jenny how to set the coordinates and ready each control panel of the TARDIS for dematerialisation, and he took just a moment to appreciate the sight of his bond mate and daughter working side by side before he turned back to Donna.

“I don’t know why you think genre novels—mysteries that reveal the darkest side of human nature, or romances that show lovers slowly putting aside their selfishness to form a relationship—I don’t know why you think those matter less than a stuffy novel written by a professor in a dusty office.”

“Agatha, though,” Donna began, but the Doctor shook his head as he tossed his coat over a strut. “The thing is, I don’t think she ever quite forgot. Great mind like that, some of the details kept bleeding through. All the stuff her imagination could use. Like, Miss Marple.”

Donna shook her head. “I should have made her sign a contract.”

“And, where is it, where is it, hold on. Here we go.” Meeting a giant wasp with Agatha Christie had triggered a visual memory, and he pulled up a piece of the grating and retrieved a wooden chest.

“C,” he explained as he opened the lid. “That is C for Cybermen, C for Carrionites, and Christie, Agatha,” he said, pulling out a Cyberman chest plate, the captured Carrionites, and a bust of Caesar, before laying his hands on the novel. “Look at that.”

He held up the paperback. It was a facsimile of the 1957 edition of *Death in the Clouds*, which featured a wasp on the cover.

Donna’s eyes lit up. “She did remember.”

“Somewhere in the back of her mind, it all lingered. And that’s not all.” He handed the book to Donna. “Look at the copyright page.”

She flipped open the front cover, and a moment later, her jaw dropped. “Facsimile edition, published in the year five billion!”

“People never stop reading them. She is the best selling novelist of all time.”

To his surprise, Donna’s face fell, and she dropped the novel. “But she never knew.”

“Well, no one knows how they’re going to be remembered,” the Doctor pointed out. “All we can do is hope for the best. Maybe that’s what kept her writing. Same thing keeps me travelling. Onwards?”

“Onwards.”

Rose watched Jenny turn the gravitic anomaliser as the Doctor and Donna stood up. Jenny bit her lip and looked at her. “That’s it… isn’t it?”
“Listen to the TARDIS,” Rose encouraged. “She knows how to fly herself better than anyone—what’s she saying?”

Jenny squeezed her eyes shut, and her nose crinkled up in concentration. The Doctor wrapped an arm around Rose’s shoulder while they felt their daughter talk to the ship.

A moment later, her blue eyes flew open. “She’s ready!”

“Then go ahead, Jenny.” The Doctor nodded at the dematerialisation lever.

Jenny grabbed it and shoved it upright with a flourish, then threw her hands up in the air and spun in a circle when the lights in the console room flashed as the TARDIS left nineteen twenty-six behind. Rose laughed when the young woman hugged her tight.

“Thank you!” Jenny whispered. “Oh, thank you!” Then she twisted away and hugged the Doctor, and then Donna, before dancing down the corridor to her room.

Donna shook her head, but before she could follow Jenny out of the console room, Rose snagged her for a hug of her own. “You are brilliant, Donna,” she said.

Donna stiffened slightly and pulled back. “Why do all of you keep saying that?” she demanded. “We all know I’m not brilliant, so stop patronising me.”

Rose blinked. “Donna… you really are. You saw the crucial clue tonight before anyone else did. For once, our experience blinded us to the truth of what you were saying—it really did mean something that all those murders were just like something Agatha would write. We wouldn’t have seen that without you, though.”

The Doctor moved around the console to join them. “And on the Ood Sphere, who was it who figured out why the Ood are so peaceful? ‘They’re born with their brains in their hands,’ you said. You remind me of Rose, the way you see things I completely miss.”

Donna blinked and her forehead wrinkled. “But…”

Rose shook her head. “No buts. You are brilliant, Donna Noble.”

The room was silent for a moment, then Donna pointed in the direction of her room. “I’m… I’ll just… Good night,” she muttered finally, then nearly ran down the corridor.

The Doctor sighed when she disappeared. “I don’t think we convinced her.”

“Not yet, but we’re getting there. She didn’t insist that she’s just a temp this time.”

Rose looked up at the Doctor. “You know, everyone else has turned in early.” She turned towards him and tugged lightly on his tie.

His eyes darkened at the sultry note in her voice, and Rose held her breath as she waited for his response. “Care for a little challenge, love?” He stroked her right arm with a barely-there touch, stopping to tease the sensitive skin of her inside elbow.

She bit her lip and nodded, nonchalantly she hoped.

Judging by his smirk, she didn’t quite manage it. He leaned down to whisper in her ear. “I’ll race you to our room. The first one there gets to undress the other.”

Rose spun around and took off down the corridor, but a moment later, the Doctor ran past her. She
tried to put on more speed, but she was no match for his long legs, and he was leaning against the 
door waiting for her when she reached their room.

“I’ve been waiting for my chance to get you out of that dress ever since I first saw you in it,” the 
Doctor said, his voice a low rumble. He pushed the door open and stepped inside before she could 
dart past him to claim the prize.

Rose played with the long string of beads she wore. “Have you?” she asked, already feeling 
breathless after only one innocent caress and some light teasing.

The Doctor rested his hands on her hips and pulled her to him before kicking the door shut with his 
foot. “Oh, yes.”

Rose put her hands on his chest. “Well, you won, Doctor. I’m all yours.” She looked up at him 
through her eyelashes and licked her lips.

He groaned, and a moment later, Rose sighed in relief when he finally kissed her. His tongue slid 
into her mouth without hesitation, and the minty fresh taste reminded Rose of her earlier edict.

You brushed your teeth, she commented when he flicked his tongue over the roof of her mouth.

Someone told me I couldn’t kiss her until I had, he reminded her. He scraped his teeth over her 
bottom lip, then soothed it with his tongue. That was all the motivation I needed.

The Doctor ran his hands up and down her back as they kissed, before finally resting them on her 
bum and pulling her snug against his body. Rose huffed; it was so close to the feeling she wanted, 
but there were too many layers of clothes between them.

But when she tried to shove his jacket off his shoulders, the Doctor broke the kiss and put six inches 
between them. “Doctor?” Rose tried to go on her tiptoes and capture his lips again, but he dodged 
her intent.

“I won our little contest,” he reminded her, his low, raspy voice feeding the desire that was building 
in her gut.

Rose swallowed the teasing challenge that rose to her lips. If she said anything to indicate how 
desperate she was, he would only slow down.

Of course, the Doctor already knew, and his nostrils flared as Rose’s desire throbbed low in her 
belly. A moment later, she felt his hand slide up her back and grab the tab of the zip. He pulled it 
down at a torturously slow pace, letting his fingers brush against her bare back as he went.

“Turn around, love.”

Rose obeyed his hoarse whisper, and he rewarded her by pushing the wide straps off her shoulders. 
The slinky red dress slid down to the floor, and then she felt his hands on her body, stoking the 
embers of desire into a blaze.

The hand on her stomach pulled her closer, until she could feel the hard lines of his body pressed 
against her back. She moaned when his hot breath hit her ear. “Do you know what I’m going to do 
next, Rose?”

“I’ve got a pretty good idea, yeah.” He nipped at her earlobe for that cheek, and Rose groaned his 
name.
“I’ll have to find some way to surprise you then,” he murmured.

A hand in the small of her back pushed her towards the bed, and Rose obediently lay down and scooted back against the pillows. The quick, economical movements of the Doctor as he stripped his own kit off spoke volumes about how turned on he already was, and Rose shivered beneath his intense gaze.

Dozens of images flashed across the bond as he climbed onto the bed. “Oh yes,” he said when the carnality of the suggestions had her arching into his telepathic touch. “I think this definitely calls for a surprise.”
No Matter What the Future Brings

Chapter Notes

In this chapter, the Doctor and Rose finally have a long overdue conversation regarding children. If you are one who prefers no kids in this ship, you can stop reading when they sit down in front of the fireplace with their cocoa about 3/4 of the way through. And even though they do decide that they want to have kids together someday, it's not something that will come up again in this story, or even in the series for several more stories.

(It is coming, and when it does, it will be well-labeled.)

Rose stretched when she woke up the next morning, feeling languid and just a bit sore. She blinked the sleep from her eyes as she reached for the Doctor, but before her hand touched him, she felt his tension over the bond.

“Doctor?” She sat up, letting the covers pool around her waist. He was sitting with his back against the headboard, and she copied him, though she turned her body slightly so she could look at him more easily. “What’s wrong?”

He sighed. “I’m don’t know if I’m being daft, or…” He ruffled his hair and looked away from her. Rose took his hand and sighed in relief when he didn’t pull it back. “Tell me what’s bothering you, and I’ll tell you if you’re being daft?” she suggested, hoping to get a smile from him.

Her concern doubled when the corners of his mouth barely turned up. “Please, Doctor.”

He looked back at her, and the frown set deep in his forehead bothered her more than anything else. “It’s just… Yesterday, when I was poisoned.”

Rose tensed; that was not the part of the day she wanted to think about. “Yeah?”

“You said you weren’t ready for me to regenerate yet. And I thought… You loved the old me; you’ve told me that before. So… would it really be so bad if I regenerated?”

Oh. She hadn’t really been thinking when she’d said that—she certainly hadn’t been thinking about how the words would sound to the Doctor.

Now that he’d told her what was bothering him, he let her feel his vulnerability over the bond, and her heart broke a little knowing she’d accidentally hurt him. Rose scooted closer to him and put her hands on his knees.

That’s not what I meant, Doctor, she told him. I loved you then and I love you now. I’ve even loved the younger versions of you we’ve met. I’ll love every you in the future, I promise.

Then why…

She reached out and took his hand, keeping her touch delicate as she stroked his fingers. These are the hands that touched me the first time we made love. She ran her finger over his eyebrow. These
are the eyes that looked into mine when we said our wedding vows.

“Rose…”

His raspy whisper brought tears to her eyes. “And that’s the voice that told me you loved me for the first time,” she concluded. “I’ll love every you, Doctor, because every Doctor is you. But there have been so many of those first moments shared with this you, and I’m not ready to let go of that yet.”

She bit her lip. “Does that make sense?”

He nodded. “My precious Rose,” he whispered as he pulled her into his lap, cradling her in his arms.

“I didn’t mean to make you doubt, Doctor.” She pressed her hand to his jaw. “I was just being sentimental, that’s all.” She frowned. “Well, that and I don’t like the thought of someone poisoning you,” she said frankly. “I will never be okay with someone trying to hurt you.”

“Quite right,” he agreed. “And that thought did occur to me earlier, when I was being just a little bit daft.”

Rose combed her fingers through his hair, scraping her nails over the back of his scalp in the way that always made him groan. “You were a little daft,” she agreed. “I’m afraid you’ll have to pay the penalty.” She shifted closer to him and brushed her nose against his.

“What’s the penalty?” he murmured, and his mouth was so close to hers that she could feel his breath against her lips.

“Hmmm… One kiss?” Rose suggested, as if he didn’t know exactly what she was angling for.

Agreed, he told her as he pressed his lips to hers. Rose’s eyes fluttered closed when he gently took her bottom lip between his and sucked, flicking his tongue over it. The soft caress was matched in the tenderness coming over the bond, and Rose’s lips parted on a sigh.

He didn’t immediately take the invitation, however, keeping the kiss gentle, almost chaste. Instead of letting them both get swept away by the passion that ran so deeply between them, he touched her reverently as he returned to each of those memories she’d invoked.

Tears sprung to Rose’s eyes when he shared the adoration he’d felt when he told her he loved her, the joy that had coursed through him the first time they’d made love, the absolute devotion in his hearts when he’d spoken his wedding vows.

Rose caught his bottom lip between her teeth and nipped lightly. I love you, she told him as she took control of the kiss, sliding her tongue into his mouth.

When he shuddered in her arms, she didn’t know what had elicited the reaction. It could have been the way she stroked her tongue against his, or it could have been the remembered emotions she chose to share. The tenderness she’d felt when he told her he loved her, knowing how hard those words had been to say; the ardent delight when they’d first made love, feeling the last barrier to complete intimacy get swept away by their shared passion; her own joy that bordered on wonder as they had finally completed their bond and she had known all of him.

The Doctor groaned and held her close, then shifted until Rose was on her back. I love you, too, Rose, he told her as they stoked their desire with soft touches and tender memories. I love you so much.

When he finally moved to join them completely, the combination of pleasure and love overwhelmed Rose, and he paused to kiss away her tears. Then she tightened her legs around his hips, drawing a
deep groan from him. Slowly, they moved together, neither striving for completion, because they knew that this moment—being wholly united in body and soul—was the closest to completion they would ever come.

Later, as they lay together in the afterglow, Rose splayed her hand over his chest in between his hearts. “I will always love you,” she whispered fiercely. “Forever, my Doctor.”

She felt his breath catch, then he dropped a kiss on the crown of her head. “Rose… Every day, the quote in your ring becomes more true. You are my forever.”

oOoOoOoOo

An idea grew in the back of the Doctor’s mind as they got dressed and made breakfast. As much as he loved having Jenny and Donna with them, it had been months since he and Rose had spent an entire day alone. The closest they’d gotten was going out for dinner a few weeks ago to celebrate six years of travelling together.

So when Jenny asked what the plans for the day were, he leaned back in his chair and tapped his fingers on the table. “Wellllll…” He looked at her and Donna. “Would you mind if Rose and I went someplace by ourselves for the day?”

Surprised pleasure sparkled over the bond, and he knew he’d made the right choice.

Donna rolled her eyes, but he thought he saw a smile through her sarcastic demeanour. “Well, if you two lovebirds want a day to yourself, I suppose Jenny and I will just have to find something to keep ourselves occupied. If only we lived in a spaceship with a media room, a library, a swimming pool, a snooker room… oh wait, we do.”

“What’s snooker?” Jenny asked as Donna got up and started clearing the table.

“Tell you what, Jenny,” Donna proposed. “Why don’t we just spend the day exploring? Oh, or we could go back to the wardrobe room and try on all the clothes!”

Rose laughed. “I did say you could go back and take a closer look later.”

“And don’t wait up for us,” the Doctor added on a whim. “Depending on how the day goes, we might find someplace to stay instead of coming home. We’ll text you later if we stay overnight.”

Thanks to dimensionally transcendent technology, Rose’s shoulder bag worked equally well as an overnight bag. They packed everything they’d need if they chose to stay away from the TARDIS overnight, then put a picnic lunch on top before closing it up.

In the console room, the Doctor added some extra spins and flourishes to his dance as he moved around the console, setting the coordinates for their private date. He glanced over his shoulder at Rose when he reached for the dematerialisation lever, and her wide smile made his hearts skip a beat.

Rose raised an eyebrow, and after he threw the lever and the TARDIS began her journey through the Vortex, he held out his hand and pulled her to her feet. “I just realised you still look at me the same way as you did the first time I took you someplace.” He rested his hands on her hips and pulled her close. “Well, the tinge of amazement and disbelief might be gone now, but the wide-eyed excitement and the challenge to really impress you—they’re both still there.”

She reached up automatically for his tie, and he shivered when her fingers touched the bare skin of his clavicle instead. “I’m pretty sure I’ll still be looking at you like that in a hundred years or more.”
When the Doctor would have bent down to kiss her, the TARDIS landed, throwing them both off balance. They caught each other with practised ease, laughter bubbling up as they straightened, then looked at the door.

Rose’s gaze darted to the door, then back to him, and the Doctor chuckled again. “After you, love,” he said warmly.

She beamed at him, then practically skipped down the ramp with him close on her heels. Fresh air wafted into the ship when she opened the door, and the Doctor said a silent thank you to his ship for taking them when and where he’d asked to go.

Rose reached for his hand as they exited the TARDIS. “So, what are we celebrating? First date?”

The Doctor shook his head. “Absolutely nothing.” He closed the door carefully, wanting to be sure Jenny and Donna would be safe inside for the day. “I just realised it had been nearly three months since you and I spent a whole day alone together."

He watched the smile on Rose’s face deepen, making her eyes glow whiskey-gold. She stepped closer to him and rested her free hand on his arm. “I love you.”

A sort of fog of weariness he hadn’t been aware of before lifted, and the Doctor resolved not to let three months go by without spending a day alone with Rose again. “I love you, too.”

Rose tilted her head back, and he bent down and pressed his lips to hers in a quick kiss. He pulled back before they could get lost in the kiss and chuckled when she pouted up at him.

Then he grabbed her hand, spun around and walked backwards a few steps, pulling her along with him. “You haven’t asked where we are,” he said as he led her to the trailhead.

He watched her take in their surroundings. “Well, it’s not Earth,” she said first. “The air feels different. And it’s spinning at a different speed than Earth does.”

“Well spotted and felt.” The Doctor swung their hands between them. “This is Gelbron, which is on the other side of the galaxy from Earth.”

“And it’s autumn?” Rose said, her voice lifting at the end to make it a question. She pointed at the trees covering the trail. “Or are the leaves red and gold naturally?”

“Nope!” The Doctor bounced lightly on the balls of his feet. “It’s autumn, and we’re going for a hike.” Then he shook his head. “And that’s all the information you’re going to get from me, Rose Tyler.” He tapped her on the nose. “No more spoilers!”

Rose laughed and moved closer to the Doctor, taking his arm and hugging it to her. “I’ve missed this,” she admitted. “I love Donna and Jenny, but I’ve missed being alone with you.”

The Doctor sighed, and then she felt the soft pressure of his lips on the top of her head. “All of last year, spent entirely alone, and then months without being alone at all. We’ll work on finding a balance.”

Rose nodded, then looked for a way to turn the conversation away from even the semi-serious topics. When she spotted an enormous, gnarled tree with sprawling branches just around the next bend, she casually let go of the Doctor’s arm and danced forward a few steps, then looked at him over her shoulder.

“Race you!” she shouted as she took off running.
“Oi!” he hollered, then she heard his feet crunching through the fallen leaves that lined the path.

Rose laughed and sped up, and with her head start, she and the Doctor reached the tree at the same time. She shrieked with laughter when he grabbed her by the waist and tickled her ribs.

“Rose Tyler, you are a cheater,” he growled in her ear before blowing a raspberry against the sensitive skin just below it.

She squirmed and managed to twist out of his grip, then backed up a few steps, while the Doctor playfully stalked her. “I prefer to think of it as… finding and exploiting the advantage whenever possible,” she retorted, giving him a cheeky smile.

The Doctor huffed and shook his head, but his eyes were dancing. He took a step towards her, and Rose suddenly found herself with her back against the broad trunk of the tree and no easy escape.

“Hmmm…” the Doctor said as he caged her in with his arms. “I think I’ve just found an advantage.” He bent down and bumped his nose against hers. “Mind if I exploit it?”

“Not at all,” Rose breathed, just before he swooped forward to catch her lips in a passionate kiss.

They found and exploited several advantages as they hiked up the mountain. Shortly before lunch, they reached a mountain lake that reflected the surrounding autumn trees in its glassy surface. The Doctor spread his coat out over the crunchy leaves, and they ate their picnic lunch by the lakeshore.

“So,” the Doctor said as they packed up the remains of their lunch. “If we keep hiking, there’s a village farther up the mountain that has a pub with rooms we could rent for the night. Or we could find another trail and go back down the mountain and be home in time for dinner. It’s up to you.”

Rose slung the bag over her shoulder and helped him shake the leaves off of his coat. “Oh, let’s keep going,” she said. “I’ll text Donna and let her know we won’t be home.”

The Doctor grinned at her. He’d hoped she would want to keep going.

After Rose sent a quick text to Donna, he took her hand and they started back up the mountain. As they gained elevation, the deciduous trees gave way to evergreen, and instead of the colourful autumn hike they’d enjoyed in the morning, the were surrounded by the sharp tang of pine needles.

Just like the Doctor remembered, the village was at the edge of the tree line. About half an hour before they reached it, the path got rocky, and he had to let go of Rose’s hand so they could scrabble over a few tricky places. But then they came out in a high meadow surrounded by the hardiest of the fir trees, and the village was spread out in front of them.

“It’s like something from a story book,” Rose said as they passed the first few stone houses.

Locals looked at them curiously as they walked by, and the Doctor waved at them.

“I thought you said they have an inn,” Rose said after the fourth person stopped to stare at them.

“They do!” The Doctor pointed at a stone building with a thatched roof and a sign hanging above the door.

Rose pursed her lips. “Then how come they’re so surprised to see strangers?” she asked logically.

“Having an inn doesn’t mean it’s used frequently,” the Doctor pointed out, and Rose couldn’t deny
the truth of what he said.

Despite her surprise, the hostler was more than happy to have guests. After a delicious meal of hearty stew, she handed them a key and directed them upstairs to her best room.

Rose sighed in delight when she turned the key in the lock and pushed open the creaky door. The room was exactly what she’d envisioned once she’d gotten a sense of the Alpine feel of the village. The ceiling on one side tilted in, following the slope of the roof. On the other side of the room, a stone hearth had a fire laid in it, and she looked forward to curling up in front of it when the autumn chill settled into the room later that night.

High windows let the rich, golden light of the autumn evening filter through the gauzy canopy draped over the large tester bed. Rose set their bag down on the short dresser, then walked over to the window and looked out on the picturesque village.

A moment later, the Doctor joined her. “Care to do some exploring before the sun sets completely?” he suggested.

Rose smiled up at him. “Of course.” She reached into the bag she’d dropped on the bed for her jacket, then held out her hand once she’d pulled it on. “Show me the most incredible thing possible in the half hour before the sun sets.”

Outside, they took the path that led farther up the mountain. “We won’t go far, but there’s an outcropping up here that gives you a panoramic view of the whole valley,” the Doctor explained as they picked their way along the rocky trail.

Rose took a deep breath as they walked, enjoying the way the woodsmoke from the village fireplaces mingled with the earthy scent of rocks and scrubby pine trees. The sun was low on the horizon now, just barely above the mountain peaks in the distance. The bright blue sky had deepened to a dusky colour, and as they took a turn in the path, streaks of orange and pink shot through it.

A few more steps and they reached the outcropping the Doctor had mentioned. “Is this impressive enough for the last shot of the day?” he asked as he gestured at the view.

Rose stared out at the valley. From here, she could see the lake they’d had lunch next to, surrounded by autumn colours set ablaze by the light of the setting sun. Following the slope of the mountain downward, she watched the trees spread out and then finally shift to open fields and meadows like they’d parked the TARDIS in.

The Doctor took her hand, and there was something very familiar about standing on the edge of a cliff hand in hand with him, looking out at a stunning view. It took her a moment, but then she landed on the memory.

“Makuyu,” the Doctor agreed, picking up on her train of thought.

Rose nodded and tightened her hold on his hand. “How long are you going to stay with me?” she asked as the sun touched the mountain peaks.

The Doctor sighed and let go of her hand to wrap his arm around her shoulders. “Forever.”

She rested her head on his shoulder as the streaks of colour spread across the sky, following the lines of the wispy clouds that had filled the sky all day. “I wish people who laugh when we say trouble is just the bits in between could see things like this,” she said quietly. “They ask, ‘In between what?’ and I never know how to explain.”
Rose felt, rather than heard, the Doctor’s hum of agreement. They stood on the edge of the outcropping for a few more minutes, both grateful that they could experience the beauty of this moment.

The colours were still spreading across the sky when the sun disappeared behind the mountains. The Doctor pulled his arm back and reached for Rose’s hand instead. “We should get back to the village. Night falls quickly in the mountains once the sun sets.”

Rose nodded, then took one last, lingering look at the sunset and the valley before turning to follow him back down the path.

They hadn’t gone very far before any reluctance to leave the beauty of the mountain top was blown away by the wind sweeping down from the summit. The air cooled rapidly after sunset, and the shift in temperature made the wind pick up. She shivered when a strong gust cut through her jacket, and in answer, the Doctor picked up the pace.

He looked at Rose as they reached the village ten minutes later. Her pink cheeks and stiff shoulders told him she was more chilled than she was letting on, so when they entered the inn, he gestured for her to go up ahead him while he stopped in the dining room to make a request.

When he entered their room a few minutes later, Rose had already changed into flannel pyjama bottoms and one of his henleys. She sat on the edge of the bed to put on fuzzy socks, then flopped backward, sinking slightly into the feather mattress.

“I might never want to leave.” She wiggled further into the cozy comfort of the bed.

The Doctor chuckled as he hung his coat and jacket up on the hooks by the bathroom door. Then he leaned against the bedpost and grinned down at her. “You know the TARDIS would give us a different bed if you’re tired of what we’ve got,” he pointed out.

Rose sighed and pushed herself upright. “I suppose our bed at home is perfectly comfortable.”

Before he could answer that, the expected knock at the door came. Rose raised her eyebrows, but he just gave her a hopefully mysterious smile and went to answer it.

A teenage girl stood on the other side, carrying a tray with two steaming mugs. “Hot chocolate, just like you ordered, sir.”

The Doctor took the mugs from her and smiled. “Thank you!” The girl bobbed her head, then reached for the door and closed it, since his hands were full.

Rose was leaning against the back of the couch when he turned around. “Hot chocolate in front of the fire?” she asked, gesturing to the fireplace behind her.

“Yes!” He carefully set the mugs down on the coffee table, then used the sonic screwdriver to start the fire. Once flames were licking away cheerily at the logs, he settled onto the loveseat and patted the cushion next to him. A moment later, he laughed when Rose just swung her legs up over the back of the loveseat and slid down onto the seat.

“Did you enjoy today?” he asked as he handed her one of the mugs.

She nodded. “Yeah, it was brilliant. I love saving planets and stopping giant wasps from killing an entire house party, but really… what I love the most is seeing new things with you.”

“Not too boring then?” he teased. “I shouldn’t try to find an insurrection for us to stop on our next
Instead of answering that ridiculous question, Rose lifted her mug to her lips and took a cautious sip of her hot chocolate. Her eyes widened as the rich, sweet chocolatey taste spread across her tongue.

“Oh, my God,” she moaned. “This is incredible.”

The Doctor chuckled and reached out to wipe a bit of whipped cream on her upper lip. He nodded as he licked it off his thumb. “Gelbronese hot chocolate is some of the best in the galaxy.”

“I can believe it.” Rose took another sip and let the flavour linger on her tongue before swallowing. Her body relaxed into the cushions as the cosiness of the evening set in—there was something deeply comforting about hot chocolate, maybe because it brought to mind all the times her mum had made it for her when she was a kid.

Some of her relaxation faded when thoughts of her own childhood sent her mind travelling down a path it had wandered several times in the last month. She sighed and shifted in her seat, trying to shove the thoughts back into the cupboard she’d been storing them in, but they were persistent tonight.

And for the first time, the Doctor was right beside her when those thoughts intruded.

“What’s on your mind, Rose?” he asked quietly.

As she stared into the fire, she knew she needed to tell him. It was only fair to talk to him about this—in fact, that was the fact that had planted the idea in her mind in the first place.

Rose set her mug down on the coffee table, then turned to face him. His eyes were dark with worry, and there was a furrow between his eyebrows as he tried to work out what was bothering her without peeking at her thoughts.

She smiled and reached for his hands, then took a deep breath. “Do you remember the day Jenny was born?” He raised an eyebrow, and she shook her head. “Of course you do. Sorry. Well… you said something that day, and I’ve sort of been turning it over in my mind ever since.”

The Doctor let go of one of her hands to tug on his ear. “I said a lot of foolish things that day.”

Rose shook her head. “This wasn’t one of those things,” she promised him, and some of his anxiety eased. “It’s just… you pointed out that couples usually discuss having children, and we never have—outside of you saying it couldn’t happen without us planning for it.”

He nodded. “It couldn’t. Your biology has changed somewhat, but the differing numbers of DNA strands would make an unplanned pregnancy impossible.”

Rose gritted her teeth together, then pushed down her impatience. He wasn’t trying to ignore the conversation, or redirect it. This was just her Doctor, honestly clueless about her point.

“Yes, I know. But… that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t talk about if we want kids,” she finally managed to spit out.

The Doctor stared at her, his mouth hanging open slightly. He blinked several times, then shook his head. “Are you…” He cleared his throat. “I suppose you’re right,” he agreed, his voice still a little higher pitched than normal.

Silence stretched between them as they both waited for the other to start the conversation. Finally,
Rose sighed—she had been the one to bring it up, after all.

“So…” She knotted her hands together to keep from fidgeting nervously. “I know you love Jenny, but I also know it was hard for you at first. Would you… would you even want another child? A baby,” she clarified, saying the word for the first time.

After five weeks of turning the idea over in her mind, Rose still hadn’t decided if she wanted to have a baby. But when the Doctor’s face went blank and he carefully concealed his own thoughts from her, the knot of disappointment in her stomach answered her question.

She dug her nails into her palms. She and the Doctor had a fantastic life. A baby in the TARDIS probably wouldn’t be a practical possibility, anyway.

Rose had just about talked herself out of wanting a baby when the Doctor shook himself out of his daze and looked down at her seriously. “What do you want, Rose?”

Oh no. The last thing she wanted was to make him feel obliged to have a baby just because she wanted one eventually. “I asked you first,” she said, aware that her voice sounded weak.

The Doctor shrugged. “And I want what you want,” he said guilelessly. “Now that I’ve worked through most of the fear of being a parent again, having a second or third or fourth child wouldn’t really make a difference.” He took a deep breath, then blew it out slowly through his nose. “But if we had a baby of our own, you would be the one going through a half-alien pregnancy. You’d be the one whose body would change.” He took her hand and squeezed. “The choice is really up to you, Rose.”

Rose pulled her hands back and clasped them together in her lap. “How would a baby fit in with our life?” Even though she knew she wanted a baby, she couldn’t completely ignore that concern.

“We’d ask the TARDIS to keep us to safe places while you were pregnant, and maybe when you got far enough along, we’d find a quiet planet to stay on until the baby was born.”

Rose gaped at him as he rattled off the answer with the surety of someone who had considered the question at length. Focusing on him now, she could feel a hint of excitement he’d attempted to conceal from her. The Doctor wanted kids, she realised, and he’d never even mentioned it.

She narrowed her eyes at him. It might not be totally fair, but the idea that he’d hidden something so important from her hurt. “Why’ve you never said anything?” she asked.

The Doctor blinked, and a furrow appeared between his brows. “Well, I’ve only been thinking about it since Jenny was born,” he said slowly. “Like you, I assume.”

Rose ran her hand through her hair, tugging lightly to vent her frustration. “Yeah. But you’ve figured out a lot of the logistics for someone who’s only been thinking about it for a month.”

The Doctor raised an eyebrow. “I do have a great big Time Lord brain, and four hours a night to be alone with my own thoughts,” he pointed out drily. “And this has been one of the main things going through my mind for the last five weeks. That’s enough time to come up with a viable plan.”

Rose traced her finger over the pattern on the upholstery. “Would you ever have said anything if I hadn’t brought it up?” she asked.

The Doctor hesitated for a moment, and she looked up at him through her eyelashes. “Probably not,” he admitted finally. “Because, like I said, I wanted the decision to be yours.”
“But how was I supposed to make an informed decision without all the information?” she challenged. “All the information, including the fact that you want kids.”

The furrow in his forehead deepened. “Rose, when I told you we couldn’t get pregnant without a little bit of genetic manipulation, your only comment was to say you’d been wondering about birth control. You didn’t say anything about saving that option till later.”

Rose opened her mouth, then closed it without saying a word. There wasn’t anything she could say—he was right. Most of her frustration with him faded when she realised she’d never given him any indication that she might one day want to have their baby.

The Doctor smiled tenderly. “Exactly. And I didn’t want to pressure you. We’ve been happy together, just the two of us, for four years. Now our family has expanded to include Jenny. We don’t need a baby to complete our lives, and I didn’t want to make you feel like we did.”

She fidgeted with the sleeves of his henley. “And… what if I think I’d like to have a baby one day.” She tried to imagine taking time off the way the Doctor had suggested, and somehow she knew they had things to do before they could take a break like that. “Maybe not right now,” she added quickly, lest he get his hopes up, “but… eventually.”

The Doctor’s happiness flooded the bond, taking Rose’s breath away. But his voice was measured when he spoke. “Then we’ll wait, and when you’re ready, we can figure out how to make it happen.”

“Yeah?” Rose said breathlessly.

“Oh, yes.”

Wild excitement beat in the Doctor’s hearts as he opened his arms for Rose. She didn’t hesitate to move into his lap, and a moment later, his breath caught in his throat as she traced her fingers over his forehead and down along his jawline.

“Would our baby look like this you?” she whispered as she ran a finger over his wonky ear.

“Maybe,” he whispered back. “But Jenny looks like my fifth incarnation—you met him before the Titanic, remember?”

Her fingers paused for a moment as she considered, then she nodded. “You’re right, she does.”

A sudden, cheeky smile caught the Doctor by surprise, and he waited to hear the thought that had popped into her mind.

“So you mean we could have a little girl with a mass of golden curls, like the sixth you? Would she want to wear your crazy quilt coat, or is fashion sense not hereditary?”

The Doctor pouted, but Rose only giggled in response. He rolled his eyes and tapped her on the nose. “Well I think it’s safe to say they’ll inherit your cheek,” he said drily. “Even Jenny seems to have gotten that, without being biologically related to you at all.”

Rose patted him on the shoulder. “You love it, Doctor,” she told him confidently.

He sighed and pulled her close, humming in contentment when she shifted so her head was resting on his shoulder. “I do,” he admitted. “I love it because it’s a part of who you are, and if our children inherited your propensity to tease me, I would love it for the same reason.”
They talked about their future children for hours, until the fire was dying in the grate. But gradually, Rose’s replies slowed, and the Doctor could feel her mind quiet against his as she drifted off to sleep. His arm was wrapped around her shoulders, and her face was pressed against his chest. It was a familiar position, and one of his favourites.

Still, they needed to go to bed. Rose grumbled when he carefully scooted to the edge of the cushion and slid his other arm under her knees. Sleep, love, he encouraged, and she settled back into his arms.

He stood up carefully, but even so, she scrunched her face up in dissatisfaction. Her scowl softened into contentment when she was draped against him even more completely, and he couldn’t resist kissing the crown of her head before carrying her to the bed.

Pulling back the covers with her in his arms was tricky, but he managed. Rose grunted when he set her down, and he quickly took off his shirt and trousers and crawled under the covers beside her.

He shook his head as he considered the impossibility of the conversation they’d just had. In his most secret thoughts, he had wondered if having Jenny on the TARDIS might lead Rose to rethink what he had always figured was a firm decision not to have children. He hadn’t really let himself hope for it, though. Having Jenny in their little family was more than he’d ever imagined, and if they were never more than a trio, travelling through space and time together, he would have been completely happy.

And they would remain that happy trio for a while yet, he reminded himself. He couldn’t look ahead down their own timeline to see when their family would start, but he sensed it was several years in the future.

The Doctor shrugged and forced down his natural impatience. “Someday” was more than he’d counted on before, and it would come soon enough.
Chapter Notes

Finally to the Library!

Chapter Twenty-three: An Unusual Summons

Rose hummed a tune to herself as she used a large brush to cover her canvas in seashell pink. The Doctor had declared a day in that morning at breakfast, and she hadn’t wasted any time getting her paints set up in her studio.

After travelling together for three months, their unique little group of four really felt like a family. Donna was exactly what she’d always wanted in an older sister—someone just a little bolder than she was, who could egg her on. She teased the Doctor like he was her little brother, never letting an opportunity to poke fun at him slide by.

And Jenny. Jenny soaked it all up, thriving under Donna’s affectionate attention and the Doctor’s doting. Like any young adult, she chafed when he tried too hard to keep her safe, and Rose had kept her promise to be the cool step-mum, listening when she needed to vent.

She sighed and tapped the handle of her brush against her cheek as she considered her next colour. After a moment, she dipped it in gold metallic paint and started painting a spiral of colour in the middle of the pale pink canvas.

A sharp telepathic prod caught her attention and nearly sent her paintbrush jerking across the canvas, ruining her painting. She gasped and put the brush back in the jar of water, then rubbed circles over her temple, trying to ease the lingering discomfort.

That wasn’t the Doctor, or the TARDIS, she realised. For a second, she thought it had come from Jenny, but she dismissed the thought almost immediately. It hadn’t felt anything like the connection she shared with her step-daughter.

And if it wasn’t from the Doctor, Jenny, or the TARDIS…

She already had her paints put away and was wiping off her hands when the Doctor knocked on the door and pushed it open without invitation. That alone told her how serious this was; the Doctor only entered her studio uninvited in the case of an emergency.

“Do you have your psychic paper?” he asked without preamble, slapping his own against the palm of his hand.

Rose shook her head. “It’s in our room.” They left the studio and she shut the door firmly behind her. “Why? What’s wrong, Doctor?”

He handed her his psychic paper as they walked the short distance to their room. Rose flipped it open and read the message, written in an unfamiliar hand.

*I need your help at the Library. Please come as soon as you can.*
Love you both.

In lieu of a signature, the message concluded with a complicated series of numbers and letters Rose immediately recognised as space-time coordinates.

The Doctor picked her psychic paper up off her vanity and read the message out loud. Rose looked at the paper in her hand, then at the Doctor.

“Is that what I felt in my head then?” she asked. “Someone sending us a message via psychic paper?”

The Doctor nodded. Rose handed him his paper back, then stripped out of her paint spattered clothes while he paced the length of the room. Then she slipped into the en-suite and listened to his explanation as she scrubbed paint off her face with a flannel.

“It’s like psychic texting in a way,” he said, and she could picture the way he punctuated the words with gestures to go with his rapid-fire delivery. “You can send a message from one piece of psychic paper to another, though it takes some training.”

Rose pulled her hair up in a sleek ponytail, then went back into their room. He was on the other side of the room when she selected a pair of comfortable jeans and a pink top out of the wardrobe, and she was zipping up her jeans when he turned around and noticed she’d changed.

“What are you doing?” the Doctor said, finally noticing that she’d changed.

Rose rolled her eyes at him as she selected a pair of hot pink Chucks. “Getting ready to go?” she said, like it was obvious.

The Doctor tugged on his ear. “Ah. Of course.”

Rose stopped lacing up her shoes to look at him incredulously. “I thought you’d be chomping at the bit, after a message like that.”

The furrow between his brows tightened. “The coordinates are already set,” he admitted. “But the last time we followed a message left on the psychic paper, you were possessed by Lady Cassandra.”

Rose finished tying her shoes, then leaned back on the edge of the bed. She had mixed feelings about their first visit to New Earth. On one hand, it was their first trip after his regeneration, and she would always have fond memories of lying in the apple grass with him. On the other… Cassandra’s invasion had left her with migraines that hadn’t faded for a week.

On the other hand… “But the last time we followed a message on the psychic paper, it was from Jack,” Rose pointed out. “Someone who knew us and was counting on us to help them out.”

The Doctor pursed his lips, and Rose could feel the strength of his uncertainty. She stepped forward and adjusted the knot of his navy and maroon floral tie, making sure it lay just right over his burgundy shirt. It was a way of giving them both time—him time to think about what she’d said, and her time to find the right words to win him over.

Finally, she ran her hands down his chest and rested them on his waist. “We’ve got to go, Doctor. Someone who trusts us and is counting on us sent that message.”

The Doctor ran his hand through his hair. Rose was right, but there was something about the whole situation that just felt… slightly off. Not like a trap, but…
A moment later, he felt Rose’s soothing touch on the bond, calming him as much as possible. The Doctor relaxed into her touch, then took her hand and walked with her out of their room. “Come on. I told Jenny to get Donna; they should be waiting for us in the console room.”

Jenny was sitting on the jump seat when they entered the room, her legs swinging and her fingers tapping on the leather seat. The Doctor tugged gently on her ponytail, then laughed when she jumped to her feet. As much as she looked like his fifth incarnation, she had all the manic energy he possessed in this body.

“All right, Dad, are you going to tell us where we’re going?” She peered down at the coordinates he’d set before getting Rose. “It looks like the fifty-first century. Am I right?”

“What I want to know,” Donna asked, “is what happened to the relaxing day we were supposed to be having. I was just getting ready to do my nails when Jenny pounded on my door and insisted that you had someplace to take us.”

The Doctor looked at her, leaning against the ramp with her arms crossed over her chest and her eyebrows raised. He never could pull one over on Donna.

“I got an inkling that something might be going on here today instead,” he explained as he threw the dematerialisation lever. “And I thought… there are plenty of days to rest, but this might be our only chance to go here.”

“And where exactly is here?” she challenged.

The TARDIS’ wheezing slowed as she landed, and despite his concerns over what might be waiting for them in the Library, the Doctor grinned at Donna. “Books,” he said enthusiastically as he jogged around the console and grabbed his coat from where it was draped over a strut. “People never really stop loving books.”

Rose opened the door, and they filed out of the TARDIS into a long gallery. Sunlight streamed into the room through clerestory windows, high in the walls. A few wooden book carts were near the ship, filled with books either on display, or waiting to be shelved.

The Doctor picked one up and thumbed through it quickly, then put it back on the cart and started walking across the room. “So, like Jenny said, this is the fifty-first century. By now you’ve got holovids, direct-to-brain downloads, fiction mist, but you need the smell. The smell of books, ladies. Deep breath.”

Donna looked over at Rose and rolled her eyes, but the Doctor pushed open a thick wooden door before any of them could comment on his raptures over the smell of old paper. They stepped out of the dimly lit room they’d landed in and into an outdoor atrium at the top of a marble staircase.

“The Library. So big it doesn’t need a name. Just a great big ‘The.’”

“It’s like a city,” Donna marvelled as they walked past huge columns.

“It’s a world,” the Doctor corrected. “Literally, a world. The whole core of the planet is the index computer. Biggest hard drive ever.”

“They installed a hard drive in a planet core?” Rose asked as they walked slowly down the flight of stairs, further into the sunlight.

“Yep!” The Doctor popped the p the way he did when he was excited about something. “It still amazes computer programmers—they don’t know how it was done.” He nodded out at the urban

They were quiet for a moment, taking in the sheer size of a library that occupied an entire planet. Clusters of skyscrapers were grouped together, connected by sky bridges. Running between the groups of buildings were rails that Rose assumed belonged to a train of some kind that would take you from one part of the planet to another.

On the side of the nearest building there was a huge electronic billboard, announcing it held books on xeno biology and art. A shiver of excitement coursed through her as she thought about all the incredible books on art she might find in the largest library in the universe.

Jenny broke the silence first. “It’s beautiful.”

The Doctor hummed. “Isn’t it? We’re near the equator, so”—He licked his finger and stuck it in the air—“this must be biographies!” he crowed. “I love biographies.”

“I love reading about real people who actually lived,” Jenny said excitedly.

The Doctor turned to his daughter, and Donna absently picked up a book that was resting on the balustrade. She flipped through the pages quickly and realised she could actually see the letters change shape as the TARDIS’ translation circuit tried to keep up with how fast the pages were moving.

She stopped on a page two-thirds of the way through, but before she could read more than a line, the Doctor plucked the book from her fingers. “Oi! Spoilers.”

“What?”

He snapped it shut and waved it at her. “These books are from your future. You don’t want to read ahead. Spoil all the surprises. Like peeking at the end.”

Jenny rolled her eyes. “Dad, we’re currently three thousand years in the future from Donna’s time. Keeping her from spoilers is like…”

A frown wrinkled her forehead, and Donna waited eagerly for the turn of phrase she’d come up with.

Jenny’s expression cleared, and there was a hint of mischief in her smile. “Like closing the barn door after the horse has gotten out!” she stated victoriously.

Everyone laughed but the Doctor, and Rose took the book from the Doctor and handed it back to Donna. “I’m afraid she’s got you there, Doctor.” She crossed her arms over her chest and shook her head when he pouted. “It’s the biography of an actor from the thirty-third century,” she said, cutting off his sputtering. “It’s not going to spoil anything if Donna reads it, aside from the fact that the notion of spoilers is ridiculous.”

“I try to keep her away from major plot developments,” the Doctor protested, though he tugged on his ear in a way Donna knew meant he was aware he’d been caught. “Which, to be honest, I seem to be very bad at,” he added as he looked around at the empty staircase. “Because you know what? This is the biggest library in the universe. So where is everyone? It’s silent.”

“I thought libraries were supposed to be quiet,” Rose pointed out as the Doctor jogged over to a nearby terminal and used the sonic screwdriver to delve through layers of information.
The Doctor looked up at her briefly as the computer ran the scan he’d started. “That’s hardly even true in your time, love,” he said absently before looking back at the computer. “No, near the end of the twentieth century, humans figured out that the most important thing was that people used the library, and that didn’t happen if they enforced an unnatural silence.”

“Maybe it’s a Sunday,” Donna suggested.

The Doctor was shaking his head before she finished the sentence. “No, I never land on Sundays. Sundays are boring.”

“Maybe everyone is just being really quiet?” Jenny offered.

Rose was watching over his shoulder as the computer did the scan he’d requested, and she leaned forward to frown at the screen when the results popped up. According to the computer, they were the only ones on the whole planet.

“Except even if people were being quiet, you’d expect them to show up on a scan,” she said, finally admitting that the Doctor’s earlier unease might not have been unwarranted.

The Doctor did something with his sonic, and Rose could see the computer code spinning again in the background. A moment later, the terminal beeped with what sounded like an error message.

“Now that’s interesting,” he muttered.

“What?” Jenny and Donna asked in unison.

“Scanning for life forms. Limiting to basic humanoids—the target audience of the Library—apart from us, I get nothing. Zippo, nada. See?”

He pointed at the message on the screen that read, *Filtered Humanoid Lifeforms Scan Complete: 4.*

“Nobody home.” He tapped repeatedly at a button on the keyboard. “But if I widen the parameters to any kind of life…”

The number changed to 1,000,000,000,000, with an error message.

“A million million,” the Doctor read. “Gives up after that. A million million.”

A shiver ran up Rose’s back and she looked around at the seemingly empty planet. “So… there’s something here we can’t see,” she said.

“That’s the only logical answer,” the Doctor agreed. His jaw twitched. “And not a sound. A million million life forms, and silence in the Library.”

“But… where could they all be?” Jenny asked practically.

Donna nodded. “Yeah, where could a million million people hide? There’s not… I mean, there’s just books.” She looked at the book in her hand, her eyes wide. “They can’t be hiding in the books, can they? Or maybe they are they books. But books can’t be alive.”

She reached for the cover and opened it slowly.

“Welcome.”

Donna jumped and dropped the book, then turned around. “That came from here,” she said, pointing back up the stairs.
The Doctor nodded. “Yeah.”

Normally, the whole sequence would have had a comic effect, but today, with the eerie feeling in the atmosphere as the question of a million million lifeforms lingered, no one laughed.

They retreated back to the room they’d parked in, and the Doctor led the way straight over to a large, round circulation desk. The top piece of a sculpture turned around to reveal a vaguely humanoid figure. Rose blinked as she looked at the very human face atop the stylised body.

“I am Courtesy Node seven one zero slash aqua. Please enjoy the Library and respect the personal access codes of all your fellow readers, regardless of species or hygiene taboo.”

Donna took another step towards the Courtesy Node. “That face, it looks real.”

“Yeah, don’t worry about it,” the Doctor said dismissively.

Rose looked up at him, instantly recognising the evasive look on his face. It is real, isn’t it?

“Is it a hologram, Dad?” Jenny asked.

The Doctor nodded slightly at Rose, then looked back at Jenny and Donna. “No, but really, it’s fine.”

The Courtesy Node spoke again. “Additional. There follows a brief message from the Head Librarian for your urgent attention. It has been edited for tone and content by a Felman Lux Automated Decency Filter. Message follows: ‘Run. For God’s sake, run.’”

The words were chilling, spoken by a statue with absolutely no emotional affect in its voice.

“Nowhere is safe. The Library has sealed itself, we can’t—Oh, they’re here.” Several sounds that Rose easily recognised as grunts of pain followed, and then the Courtesy Node said, “Message ends. Please switch off your mobile comm. units for the comfort of other readers.”

“So that’s why we’re here,” the Doctor muttered. “Any other messages, same date stamp?” he asked the Courtesy Node.

“One additional message. This message carries a Felman Lux coherency warning of five zero eleven —”

The Doctor waved off the disclaimer. “Yeah, yeah, fine, fine, fine. Just play it.”

“Message follows: ‘Count the shadows. For God’s sake, remember, if you want to live, count the shadows. Message ends.’”

That made less than no sense to Rose, and she would have brushed it off if genuine fear hadn’t swelled up in the Doctor. He reached for her hand and pulled her close, while looking around the room that was half-shadow.

Jenny looked at them, her features pinched with fear and confusion. “Dad?”

The Doctor took a deep breath and nodded once. “Right, everyone,” he said, his calm voice telling them more about how serious the situation was than any amount of shouting would have done. “Stay out of the shadows.”

Then he spun around and strode out of there room, Rose’s hand was still clasped tightly in his. Despite the fear in his voice, he didn’t hesitate as they walked past the TARDIS. She could feel his
curiosity—he still wanted to know who had sent them the message on the psychic paper and why.

Still, he was walking so fast she almost had to jog to keep up. He meant to wrap up that mystery as quickly as possible and get them off the planet. She kept quiet as they went through a door into a room that looked like what Rose expected of a library, with row after row of bookshelves.

Donna and Jenny caught up with them only a few metres into the room, and Donna planted herself directly in front of them. “All right you two, what’s going on here? We had a perfectly relaxing day planned, and then suddenly we’re taking a trip. And don’t think I didn’t hear you a moment ago, Doctor—‘So, that’s why we’re here,’ you said. So, out with it.”

Jenny nodded. “And you’re really…” She hesitated and glanced from the Doctor to Donna and back again. “…worried, Dad,” she added, settling on a less concerning word than “terrified.”

The Doctor sighed, but handed Donna his psychic paper, and she flipped it open to read the message still visible there. “Someone asked for our help.”

“I love you both?” Donna raised her eyebrows when she passed the paper back.

Rose bit her lip. From the moment she’d read the message, it had tugged at her. Someone was counting on them.

“I wish I could figure out who sent it,” she mumbled. “Jack and Martha both have my mobile number, so they could just text. It’s got to be…”

Her voice trailed off when she realised the Doctor was staring over her shoulder at the aisle behind her. Rose turned around, and her eyes widened when she realised the lights were going out, one row at a time.

The Doctor had had his suspicions when they listened to the last message, warning them to count the shadows. But it was only now, as he watched the lights go out plunging the Library deeper into darkness—creating more shadows—that he knew for sure what they’d stumbled upon. A planet that was seemingly empty, yet claimed to be teeming with life? A warning to count the shadows? And a message from a mysterious person, asking for help at the Library?

*Vashta Nerada.*

“What’s happening?” Donna asked.

The Doctor pushed her and Jenny towards the light, then grabbed Rose’s hand again. “Run!”

Ahead of them, Jenny’s boots hit the floor with rhythmic thuds while Donna’s ponytail trailed behind her. The Doctor felt his coat start to wrap around his legs and he used his free hand to tug it loose, so he wouldn’t trip.

*We need to find someplace safe,* Rose said.

The Doctor grit his teeth together and nodded. He strained his eyes for some kind of exit. They turned a corner and finally, at the end of an aisle, there was a set of intricately carved wooden doors only twenty feet away from them. Everyone skidded to a halt right in front of the doors, but when the Doctor try to push them open, they wouldn’t budge.

“Come on,” he grunted, throwing his weight against the doors.

“What, is it locked?” Donna demanded, her voice shrill.
He shook his head and pushed harder on the stuck door. “Jammed. The wood’s warped.” The electrical fizz of lights going out got louder as the darkness and the shadows came closer, and despite his best efforts to stay calm, panic welled up inside him.

Jenny wrapped her arms around herself and looked back over her shoulders at the encroaching darkness. “Use your screwdriver, Dad!”

“I can’t,” he growled, rattling the doorknob. “It’s wood.”

“What, it doesn’t do wood?” Donna snarled.

An idea struck the Doctor, and he pulled the sonic out of his pocket. “Hang on, hang on,” he said as he pointed it at the crack between the doors. “I can vibrate the molecules, fry the bindings. I can shatterline the interface.”

“Oh, get out of the way.” Donna shoved him aside and kicked the door open.

All four of them piled into the room and slammed the doors shut behind them, then the Doctor grabbed a book off a nearby table and slid it into the handles as a rudimentary bar lock.

Once the immediate danger was over, he turned to get a look at their surroundings. The circular room with a rotunda was obviously a reading room, but he didn’t have a chance to admire the tables lining the outer walls.

A security camera hovered in the middle of the rotunda, its lens pointed directly at them. The Doctor stuck his hands into his pockets and tried to smile like he hadn’t been caught breaking down a door.

“Oh. Hello. Sorry to burst on you like this. Okay if we stop here for a bit?”

Rose blinked when the camera dropped to the floor like a rock. She and Jenny walked over to it, and Jenny nudged it with her foot.

“What is it?” she asked.

Rose bent over to pick it up. “It’s a security camera,” she explained as she turned it over in her hands. “But I think it switched itself off.”

The Doctor held out his hand, and she tossed the camera to him. “Nice door skills, Donna,” he said as he pointed the sonic screwdriver at the camera.

“Yeah, well, you know, boyfriends. Sometimes you need the element of surprise.”

Rose recoiled. “What kind of men have you been dating?” she said before she could stop herself. “Sorry,” she added a second later. “Not my business, but… Sorry.”

Donna shrugged. “Nah, you’re right.”

Jenny looked like she wanted to ask questions, but Rose shook her head quickly. She could come up with half a dozen reasons why a woman would learn to kick down doors because of the men she dated, and none of them were good. If Donna wanted to elaborate more, she would—but they wouldn’t harass her about it.

After a brief, awkward silence, Donna looked down at the Doctor, who was still messing with the security camera. “So,” she said briskly. “Did we just run away from a power cut?”

Rose could sense the Doctor’s immediate and unqualified negative, but he didn’t dismiss the idea out
loud. “Possibly,” he allowed.

“Is it safe here?” Jenny asked, looking around the reading room uneasily.

“Of course we’re safe,” the Doctor said insouciantly. “There’s a little shop.”

All three women turned to look at the wall he’d tilted his head towards. There was a shop, and a sign pointing towards the entrance.

“Gotcha!” the Doctor crowed triumphantly, pulling their attention back to him.

“Ooo, I’m sorry,” he said a moment later. He carefully set the security camera back down on the floor. “I really am. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.” He looked up at Rose, Donna, and Jenny. “It’s alive.”

“You said it was a security camera,” Donna protested.

He pushed himself back to his feet and twirled his sonic screwdriver once before sliding it into his coat pocket. “It is. It’s an alive one.”

Messages kept scrolling across the screen, this time warning that others were coming.

“Others?” Jenny said. “What’s it mean, others?”

Donna waited for the Doctor or Rose to answer, but they were silent. Well, I’ve had enough silence in the Library. She looked around and spotted another one of those Courtesy Nodes.

“Excuse me,” she said as she strode towards it. “What does it mean, others?”

The Doctor snorted. “That’s barely more than a Speak Your Weight machine; it can’t help you.”

Donna looked back at him and raised her eyebrows. “So why’s it got a face?” she challenged.

She didn’t expect the answer she received.

“This flesh aspect was donated by Mark Chambers on the occasion of his death,” the Courtesy Node said calmly.

Donna looked back at the Doctor, who was rubbing at the back of his neck like he’d been hoping she wouldn’t figure that out. “It’s a real face?”

The Courtesy Node decided to answer that question, too. “It has been actualised individually for you from the many facial aspects saved to our extensive flesh banks. Please enjoy.”

“It chose me a dead face it thought I’d like?” Donna screeched. She looked back at the Doctor and Rose, who had walked over to her and both wore slightly sheepish expressions. “That statue’s got a real dead person’s face on it.”

“It’s the fifty-first century,” the Doctor explained. “That’s basically like donating a park bench.”

“It’s donating a face!” Donna shot back, pointing to her own face and backing away from the creepy statue.

A small hand grabbed her wrist and yanked Donna a few feet back and to the left. Donna glared at Jenny. “I can move on my own, thanks.”

The Doctor shook his head and pointed to where Donna had been standing. “The shadow. Look.”
Donna looked at it, then back at the Doctor. “What about it?”

Rose looked around the reading room. “Count the shadows.”


“No, Donna,” Jenny said quietly. “What’s casting it?”

Donna looked down at the triangular shadow on the floor, then slowly raised her eyes to the ceiling, hoping to see something that would explain the presence of the shadow.

There was nothing.

The Doctor shuddered at how close they’d come to losing Donna.

An electrical hum distracted him, the same sound they’d heard earlier. He turned his head slowly to look down the corridor that led to the reading room. The lights were flickering and going out, just like they had in the stacks.

“The power must be going,” Donna said, though he could tell in her voice that she didn’t really believe that.

The Doctor shook his head. “This place runs on fission cells. They’ll out burn the sun.” The Vashta Nerada were turning off the lights because living shadows could hide more easily in the dark.

“All right then, love, why is it dark?” Rose asked calmly.

He took her hand, then pulled Jenny closer and motioned for Donna to circle in as well. “It’s not dark,” he said, his voice hoarse with anger and fear.

Donna tapped on his arm, and he looked over at her. She pointed to the floor, where the triangular shadow had been just a few moments ago. “That shadow. It’s gone.”

The Doctor’s throat went dry. Rose shuddered in his arms, and he tried to get his fear under control instead of projecting the full force of it to her. “We need to get back to the TARDIS,” he said, surprised by how even his voice sounded.

The drive to get home to safety thrummed inside him, in time with his heart beats. Whoever had called for them would just have to manage on their own. They were already running out of time to make it out of the Library alive.

“Why?” asked Jenny.

“Because that shadow hasn’t gone.” The Doctor swallowed. “It’s moved.”

The Courtesy Node went crazy then, repeating the same message over and over. “Reminder. The Library has been breached. Others are coming. Reminder. The Library has been breached. Others are coming. Reminder. The Library has been breached.”

Rose stared at the Courtesy Node and rubbed the Doctor’s back, trying to calm him down. He hadn’t been this frightened since they’d run into the Weeping Angels with Martha, and his panic was interfering with his ability to communicate.

*Calm down, love,* she urged. *Just talk to us and tell us what’s going on.*

The Doctor took a deep breath, but before he could get another word out, an explosion blew open
the double doors on the opposite side of the room. Six people in spacesuits stepped into the room. The glass on the suits was tinted black, hiding their faces, but then the leader reached up and adjusted the filter.

Rose stared at the woman’s heart-shaped face. Wide hazel eyes looked back at her beneath furrowed brows, and Rose suddenly knew—this was the person who’d called them. The fact that she’d never met the woman before in her life added a sudden complexity to the day that she hadn’t counted on.

*Time travel.* She sighed and rubbed her temple.

The tall stranger looked at her, then at the Doctor, Donna, and Jenny. She seemed to take a deep breath before turning back to her crew.

“Pop your helmets, everyone.” She took her own helmet off and shook out her long, brown ponytail. “We’ve got breathers.”

“How do you know they’re not androids?” one of her team challenged, though everyone did as she ordered and took their helmets off.

The woman held Rose’s gaze steadily. “Because. I know them.”

The Doctor seemed not to hear that announcement. He stepped away from Rose, his hands clenched into fists. “Get out,” he ordered, his voice tense.

A smile played on the corners of the woman’s mouth, and Rose wondered if she really knew them. Because if she did, wouldn’t she recognise that he was about thirty seconds from an outburst?

*Unless she’s never seen him in a dangerous situation like this.* Suddenly wanting to shield the young woman from what was to come, Rose reached out and put her hand on the Doctor’s arm. “Doctor.”

He took a deep breath and blew it out slowly, but the tension in his back didn’t ease and his jaw was still twitching. “We’re leaving, and you should too. Get back in your rocket and fly away.”

“Who is this?” A man stepped forward and glared at the woman. “You said we were the only expedition. I paid for exclusives.”

Her smirk deepened and she looked down at the shorter man, meeting his gaze steadily. “They’re part of my team.”

Rose felt the ripple of shock that washed through the Doctor when he heard those words, and she realised he hadn’t seen the recognition on the woman’s face and put the pieces together.

The man sighed, but he nodded. “It would have been nice if you’d informed me more people would be meeting us here. And I really would love to know how they got through the protections around the planet. But…” He gestured to a pretty young woman standing off to the side. “Miss Evangelista, I want to see the contracts.”

The Doctor watched the party with growing incredulity. Had he not been clear enough in his recommendation that they all leave? Why were they standing here talking?

The stranger looked up at him, her helmet tucked under her arm. “You came through the north door, yeah? How was that, much damage?”

He put his hands on his hips and looked down at this person who was delaying everyone’s escape. “Please, just leave. I’m asking you seriously and properly, just l—”
The man’s words sank in suddenly, and the Doctor broke off in mid-thought to look back at him, then at the rest of the group—all young, likely graduate students working as interns. He looked at the woman who claimed to know them, and judged her to be just a few years older. Their advisor.

He sighed and rocked back on his heels. “Hang on. Did you say expedition?”

The balding man nodded. “My expedition. I funded it.”

The Doctor groaned and looked back at the woman. “Oh, you’re not, are you? Tell me you’re not archaeologists.”

She pressed her lips together, finally making an effort to hide her smirk. “Got a problem with archaeologists?”

He snorted. “I’m a time traveller. I point and laugh at archaeologists.”

“Ah. Doctor Melody Pond, archaeologist.” She wasn’t even bothering to hide her smirk now.

Rose stepped forward and shook the other woman’s hand. “I think it’s time for introductions,” she said. “You might know us, but we don’t know your team.” She smiled at the black woman standing behind Doctor Pond—she was the one who’d asked if they were androids. “I’m Rose, this is the Doctor, our daughter Jenny, and our friend Donna. What’s your name?”

The woman blinked. “Anita.”

“Right,” the Doctor interrupted. “We could do introductions, or we could leave. I vote for leaving.”

He leaned forward, resting his weight on the balls of his feet as he looked into Doctor Pond’s eyes. “And as you leave, you need to set up a quarantine beacon. Code wall the planet, the whole planet. Nobody comes here, not ever again. Not one living thing, not here, not ever.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted Jenny grab Anita’s arm as she wandered past, towards the shadowy edge of the room. “Stay out of the shadows, Anita,” she warned.


Melody Pond blinked up at him, and something in the indulgent expression on her face irritated the Doctor even more.

“Does she think I’m joking?”

“He’s serious, Doctor Pond. He still hasn’t told us exactly what’s on this planet, but it’s swarming with something, and whatever it is, it’s bad. We need to get out of here.”

“Find a nice, bright spot and just stand,” he ordered. “If you understand me, look very, very scared.” The archaeology team looked more befuddled than scared, and he shook his head. “No, bit more scared than that.” Frowns deepened, and they shifted their weight from one foot to the other. The Doctor shrugged. “Okay, do for now.”

For the first time, Doctor Pond hesitated, licking her lips and looking at Rose. “Rose?”

Rose nodded. “He’s serious, Doctor Pond. I’m still not going anywhere.” The man paying for the expedition put his helmet under his arm and scowled at them. “My family has waited one hundred years to come back and check on the Library.”

The Doctor raised his eyebrows. His family owned the Library? Which made him something-something Lux, as in the Felman Lux coherency warning.
The Doctor ground his teeth together, then looked away from the arrogant Mr. Lux to a younger black man standing uncertainly on the edge of the group. “You. Who are you?”

“Um, Dave.”

He grabbed Dave by the shoulder and pushed him, none-too-gently, back to the door the group had entered through. “Okay, Dave.”

“Oh, well, Other Dave,” Dave added before the Doctor could finish his sentence. He stopped and pointed back at the last person needing to be introduced. “Because that’s Proper Dave, the pilot. He was the first Dave, so when we—”

“Other Dave,” the Doctor interrupted, then pulled him the last few feet to the door. He pointed down the corridor. “The way you came, does it look the same as before?”

“Yeah,” Other Dave said, then he looked properly and shook his head. “Oh, it’s a bit darker.”

“How much darker?” the Doctor prodded.

The kinks of Other Dave’s tightly curled hair cast shadows on the door behind him as he pointed towards the darkened stacks. “Oh, like I could see where we came through just like a moment ago. I can’t now.”

The Doctor fought back his panic. The shadows were closing in on them, and before too much longer, every escape route would be closed off. He backed away from the door and stared purposely at Other Dave.

“Seal up this door. We’ll find another way out.”

“We’re not looking for a way out,” the snappish older man insisted. “Miss Evangelista?”

The pretty young woman stepped forward with a stack of papers in her hands. “I’m Mr. Lux’s personal everything.” She handed the papers to the Doctor, Rose, Jenny, and Donna. “You need to sign these contracts agreeing that your individual experiences inside the library are the intellectual property of the Felman Lux Corporation.”

“Oh, that’s nice, isn’t it?” Rose winked up at him, and the Doctor felt the tiniest bit of his tension ease.

Jenny and Donna both made similar sounds of assent, all of them looking at the Doctor. On his nod, the four of them tore the contracts in two and tossed the ripped paper onto the floor.

Mr. Lux pointed at them. “My family built this library. I have rights.”

“I’m not interested in your rights,” the Doctor snarled. “Something came to this library and killed everything in it. Killed a whole world.” He sucked in a breath through his nose. “The only thing I’m interested in is getting my family home safely. I suggest you do the same.”

Melody Pond bit her lip. “Surely whatever killed those people is long-dead.”

The Doctor looked up at the ceiling and rubbed his hands over his face. “Rose told you there was a swarm. What if they’re not dead? What if, whatever they are, they’ve been living and breeding on this planet for one hundred years?”

Mr. Lux’s annoyed voice interrupted his rapid questions. “What are you doing?”
The Doctor looked across the room to where Mr. Lux was confronting Other Dave, waving a torch like a club.

Other Dave had a caulk gun pressed to the door jamb, and he looked from Mr. Lux to the Doctor. “He said seal the door.”

“You’re taking orders from him?” Mr. Lux demanded.

The Doctor smiled darkly and snuck up behind Mr. Lux “Spooky, isn’t it?” he murmured as he snagged the torch out of Mr. Lux’s hand and shone it into the dark corners of the room.

Rose watched him as he inspected the room. His back was rigid, though that was partially concealed by the heavy coat draped over his shoulders. But it was the fear she could almost taste that made her want to grab her family and run straight back to the TARDIS. The Doctor knew what was here, and they were all in terrible danger.

“You want to know what’s here?” he asked, then answered his rhetorical question. “I’ll tell you. Almost every species in the universe has an irrational fear of the dark. But they’re wrong, because it’s not irrational. It’s Vashta Nerada.”

Vashta Nerada.

Even without knowing what they were, the name sent a shiver down Rose’s back. As she watched the Doctor as he stood on the edge of the light, shining the torch into the darkness, she paid attention to his thoughts, and the shiver became a shudder.

Carnivorous shadows. Shadows that eat.

Jenny crossed the room to stand with her father, peering into the darkness with him, but Donna stood alone beneath the centre of the rotunda. “What’s Vashta Nerada?” she asked.

“It’s what’s in the dark,” the Doctor said, his quiet, tense voice matching the ominous words. “It’s what’s always in the dark.”

Rose spun around, looking at the archaeology team who were all staring at the Doctor. “Lights!” she demanded. “The shadows are dangerous, so let’s fill this room with light.”

The Doctor nodded and tossed the torch to Mr. Lux as he strode back to the centre of the light. “Exactly right, Rose,” he said as he shrugged out of his coat and draped it over the circulation desk. “Form a circle. Safe area. Big as you can, lights pointing out.”

Melody nodded at her team. “Oi. Do as he says.”

“You’re not listening to this man?” Mr. Lux demanded.

Rose clenched her fists and took a few deep breaths; less than ten minutes in the presence of Mr. Lux, and already her patience was at its limit.

Melody rolled her eyes. “Obviously,” she said, with just a hint of an accent Rose couldn’t quite make out. She rattled off directions to the rest of her team quickly, delegating with the air of experience. “Anita, unpack the lights. Donna and Jenny can help. Other Dave, make sure the door’s secure, then help them if they aren’t done. Mr. Lux, put your helmet back on—block the visor. Proper Dave, find an active terminal. I want you to access the library database. See what you can find about what happened here a hundred years ago.”
She took a breath and looked at the Doctor and Rose before ducking behind the circulation desk. “And if I could talk to the two of you, over here?”

The Doctor and Rose exchanged a look before nodding and following Melody. Rose couldn’t help noticing that they were conveniently out of earshot of the rest of the group, as long as they kept their voices down.

“Doctor Pond, why am I the only one wearing my helmet?” Mr. Lux asked wearily.

“I don’t fancy you,” she said blithely.

Rose swallowed a laugh at the impish expression on the mysterious young woman’s face. It had nothing to do with who she fancied—Doctor Pond was just tired of seeing Mr. Lux’s condescending expression every time she looked up. Rose didn’t blame her, but sadly, once he realised it wasn’t necessary, Mr. Lux removed his helmet.

The Doctor paused just before stepping behind the desk. “Don’t let your shadows cross,” he ordered. “Seriously, don’t even let them touch. Any of them could be infected.”

“How can a shadow be infected?” Other Dave asked.

You still haven’t really explained that part, Doctor, Rose pointed out.

He ran a hand through his hair. Let’s see what Doctor Pond has to say, then I’ll finish explaining the Vashta Nerada.

Donna watched the Doctor and Rose step off to the side with this strange woman while she and Jenny carried the lights Anita was unpacking to the middle of the room, setting them up in a circle. Doctor Pond’s opening assertion that she knew them had seemed a little far-fetched, but there was something familiar in the way she interacted with her crew, and after paying attention, Donna had figured it out—she sounded like the Doctor, the way he stepped into a situation and automatically took charge.

Plus, there was the way she’d turned to Rose for verification of the Doctor’s claim that they were in danger. That said a lot about how well she knew the couple.

“I know,” Jenny murmured, keeping her voice low. “It’s weird, isn’t it—meeting someone supposedly from your future?”

“Excuse me, can I help?” Miss Evangelista asked before Donna could reply to Jenny.

Other Dave had just joined them, and the smirk that passed between him and Anita really got under Donna’s skin.

“No, we’re fine,” Anita said.

The young personal assistant didn’t give up. “I could just you know, hold things.”

“No, really, we’re okay,” Other Dave insisted.

Miss Evangelista’s shoulders slumped and she walked off, joining her boss who was doing something with a handheld device. Donna watched for a moment as she tried to get Mr. Lux to give her something to do, but he just held up his hand—dismissing her just like the others had.

Donna scowled and stood up so she could confront Other Dave and Anita. “Couldn’t she help?” she
said sharply.

Jenny looked up from the nearly-finished circle of light, a faint smile on her face, and the approval emboldened Donna. She’d had enough experience in her life of being treated like she was useless. But at least she’d never been treated like that by her co-workers, unlike Miss Evangelista.

Other Dave shook his head. “Trust me. I just spent four days on a ship with that woman. She’s… er…”

Anita sighed and cut in. “Couldn’t tell the difference between the escape pod and the bathroom. We had to go back for her.” She and Other Dave exchanged another grin. “Twice.”

Donna glared at the two, and they quickly looked away from her and went back to work getting the lights set up. Convinced she’d made it clear what she thought of their attitude, she looked for Miss Evangelista, hoping she could at least be of use making the other woman feel better, but Mr. Lux was talking to her.

*Mr. Lux’s personal everything,* she thought cynically. If the young woman was really as useless as Anita and Other Dave claimed, then she must be there to be eye candy. Donna gritted her teeth together. Three thousand years in the future, and nothing had changed.

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The Doctor shoved his hands into his coat pockets and glared at Doctor Melody Pond. “Is there a point to this little meeting?” he bit out. “Because there are ten people, including the three of us, whose lives depend on me figuring out a way to get us out of here. And I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but the exits are being cut off one by one.”

Rose nudged him with an elbow to the ribs, but he didn’t apologise. Standing in the dimly lit reading room on a planet that had been overrun by Vashta Nerada was frankly terrifying, and the fact that no one but Rose really seemed to be taking his concerns seriously only made it worse.

Melody Pond didn’t flinch in the face of his anger. She just smiled, a little sadly, and held up a wallet the Doctor immediately knew held a piece of psychic paper. “I just wanted to thank you for coming when I called.”

“Oh, that was you?” the Doctor asked, even though he’d figured that out.

“Yes, that was me. Psychic paper is more reliable than super-charged mobile phones in certain parts of the universe.” Melody pursed her lips and looked at them. “I suspected, when you made that crack about archaeologists, that I might have gotten you even earlier than I realised. You don’t know who I am, do you?”

The Doctor and Rose exchanged a look. “Should we, Doctor Pond?” Rose asked.

Melody flinched at the title. “First of all, please call me Melody. Hearing you call me Doctor Pond is…” She shook her head. “It’s just weird.”

“All right, Melody,” Rose agreed.

She was surprised when several of the tense lines around Melody’s eyes and mouth disappeared. Melody slid her psychic paper back into her bag. “And yes. You’ll know me, one day,” she assured them. “And I know anyone could say that, especially since you mentioned upfront that you’re time travellers—really, Doctor, you usually play that card a little closer to the vest.”
“She’s right, Doctor.”

“Oi!” The Doctor felt his lower lip protrude slightly, but he didn’t care if he was pouting. Rose was supposed to be on his side.

Melody winked at Rose. “You might be decades younger than when I know you, but I see not much has changed between now and then.”

The Doctor blinked at the casual implication that Melody knew they didn’t age, then shook his head quickly. “Yes, back to you knowing us in our future,” he cut in. “How can we believe you, since, as you pointed out, anyone could say that?”

Melody sighed. “You gave us all a code word, said it was something you’d only ever tell your closest friends and family, so we could use it if we met you this far out of order. I never thought I’d have to use it.” She clasped her hands in front of her, a picture that looked odd with the heavy gloves of her suit. “We’ve met a year or two out of order before, but never before you knew me…”

“What’s the code word?” Rose asked.

Melody took a deep breath and lowered her voice before speaking the words with solemnity. “Bad Wolf.”
The Doctor’s hearts stopped, and Rose’s shock mirrored his. *I can hardly believe we’d even tell that to family and friends,* he told her.

Rose squeezed his hand. *But what better code word could there be? We’ll definitely never share it with anyone who isn’t family, or nearly.*

A loud “brng” interrupted their private conversation. The Doctor was frankly grateful for an excuse to turn away from Melody Pond.

“Sorry, that was me,” Proper Dave said, his hands hovering over the keyboard. “Trying to get through into the security protocols. I seem to have set something off. What is that? Is that an alarm?”

“Doctor?” Donna turned around and walked towards them. “Doctor, that sounds like—”

“It is,” Melody agreed, seeming to have regained her composure. “It’s a phone.”

The Doctor raised his eyebrows. The sound of a telephone ringing wasn’t one you heard in the fifty-first century, hence Proper Dave’s confusion. *So how is Melody Pond familiar with it?*

The Doctor jogged over to the terminal, vaguely aware that Donna was explaining what a phone was to Jenny.

Proper Dave was working on the terminal again, but the phone kept ringing. “I’m trying to call up the data core, but it’s not responding. Just that noise.”

“All right, so why is a phone ringing in the middle of the Library?” Rose asked practically.

The Doctor had an idea. In a Library with living security cameras, what if calling up the data core was literal? “Let me try something.” He put a firm hand on Dave’s shoulder, and the man slid out the way, allowing him to take the keyboard. *If I can just get the call to connect…* he thought as he typed commands into the computer.

A moment later, the message. “Access Denied” flashed on the screen.

“Okay, doesn’t like that. Let’s try something else.” He switched to the command that would bring up the video call interface, and almost immediately, the monitor faded to static.

“What did you do?” Proper Dave said.

“I made a call,” the Doctor explained as they waited for the lines to resolve. “Okay, here it comes.”

But the picture wasn’t what he expected. Instead of being an office or futuristic setting, they were looking at a perfectly average home. A young girl sat at a table colouring, but when the call connected, she looked up and stared at him in shock.

“Hello?” the Doctor said.

“Hello. Are you in my television?” she asked.
The Doctor scratched his face. “Well, no, I’m, I’m sort of in space. Er, I was trying to call up the data core of a triple grid security processor.”

The girl nodded immediately, some of her confusion fading. “Would you like to speak to my dad?”

He nodded. “Dad or your mum. That’d be lovely.”

The girl’s head tilted, then her eyes went wide. “I know you. You’re in my library.”

The Doctor’s jaw dropped slightly. “Your library?” he repeated.

“The library’s never been on the television before. What have you done?” she demanded, more than a hint of accusation in her voice.

“Er, well.” The Doctor looked down at the keyboard. “I just rerouted the interface.”

He tapped something on the keyboard, and the picture disappeared.

“What happened?” Melody asked. “Who was that?”

Sudden understanding swept over Rose, and the Doctor glanced down into her eyes, sparkling with excitement. He shook his head just slightly, and she raised an eyebrow, but gave an equally imperceptible nod.

“I need another terminal,” the Doctor said when he got yet another “Access Denied” message. He grabbed Rose’s hand and darted around the edge of the circulation desk to the terminal there. “Keep working on those lights,” he ordered Anita and Other Dave as he and Rose jogged past them. “We need those lights!”

“All right, Rose, what have you figured out?” he asked as soon as they were alone.

“You called the data core, yeah?”

He nodded.

Well. If it’s that literal, what if… what if there’s some kind of virtual reality or artificial intelligence at the heart of the computer? What if the girl is the computer?

The Doctor tugged on his ear while he considered Rose’s suggestion. And she asked if I wanted her dad when I mentioned the security, he realised.

Yeah, that was when I started to put it together.

I think you’re onto something, Rose. He typed furiously, trying to make the same video call connection that he’d made before, but it seemed like the program was completely missing from the hard drive. The command path didn’t even exist anymore.

“Why won’t you just work?” he growled quietly at the terminal. The shadows at the edges of the room pressed down on him; any one of them could be infected.

Rose put her hand on his shoulder. “Calm down,” she whispered. “You’ll figure something out, and then you’ll get us all home.”

The Doctor took a deep breath, then reached up and squeezed her hand. Thank you.

Donna watched Rose calm the Doctor down from where she stood on the other side of the room.
There was something—at least one thing—that they weren’t telling everyone else, she realised.

“I know,” Melody Pond said from Donna’s other side.

She and Jenny turned around to face the unknown woman, Donna with a scowl on her face. “What? You don’t know what I was thinking.”

Doctor Pond arched an eyebrow. “You were thinking that they’re so obvious, and they don’t even have a clue. Because you’re right, Donna, they’re over there having a private conversation about what’s going on that they don’t want to share with us yet.”

“How do you know that?” Jenny challenged, her arms crossed over her chest. “How do you know my parents, and us?”

Doctor Pond looked at Jenny, a sad smile on her face. “I can’t tell you that, Jenny. There are rules in time travel, and I’m bending them already.” She took a breath and nodded in the direction of the Doctor and Rose. “But I do know you, and that’s how I knew what Donna was thinking, and it’s how I know what the Doctor and Rose are doing.” She held her hands out. “I know you. All of you.”

Donna snorted. “Look, Doctor Pond—”

The archaeologist flinched. “Melody, please.”

“All right, Melody. You’re trying to tell me that wherever you are in their future—which I’m not sure I believe that, by the way—I’m still there?” She shook her head. “There’s no way. I’m surprised they’ve kept me around this long.”

Melody’s eyes narrowed. “Donna Noble, you are brilliant,” she said earnestly. “The Doctor and Rose would have taken you home after a single trip if you weren’t cut out for life on the TARDIS.”

_Well, that settles the question of if she really knows them_, Donna realised. Or at least she knew enough about them to know the name of their ship. Still, she scoffed and shook her head. “On my first trip, I tried to get them to change a fixed point in time. Not so brilliant.”

“You couldn’t know,” Melody countered. “And you were the one who encouraged them to save someone. Yes, I know the story,” she added, then immediately pressed her lips into a thin line and rubbed at her temple. “I shouldn’t be saying this, but I couldn’t let you think they don’t value you.”

Jenny nudged her and smiled brightly when she looked down at her. “I told you, Donna!” she exclaimed. “You’re an important part of our family.”

Donna started to look back at the Doctor and Rose, but her gaze fell on Miss Evangelista, looking awkward and alone on the edge of the room. Melody Pond chuckled. “Go on, Donna. Be brilliant.”

The encouragement felt sarcastic to Donna, but then Jenny nodded, the smile still on her face. “Go on—talk to her. I’m going to see if I can help Proper Dave on the computer.”

Donna straightened and walked across the room, trying not to think about how badly she failed at encouraging Agatha Christie. Halfway to Miss Evangelista, books started flying through the air. When she was nearly knocked out by a copy of _Atlas Shrugged_, she crouched and put her hands over her head to avoid getting hit.

“What’s that?” the Doctor said from his terminal. “I didn’t do that. Did you do that?” he asked Proper Dave.
“Not me,” Proper Dave denied, still working at the other terminal.

The books finally stopped flying, and Donna stood up and brushed herself off. Then she continued on her way to Miss Evangelista. “You all right?”

The young woman was shaking a little, and she danced from one foot to the other. “What’s that? What’s happening?” she asked, looking over at her boss for some kind of reassurance.

“I don’t know,” Mr. Lux called from the other side of the room.

Donna thought quickly, searching for some reason to talk to Evangelista. “Oh, thanks,” she said, putting a hand on the woman’s arm, “for um, you know, offering to help with the lights.”

A wry smile crossed her pretty face. “They don’t want me. They think I’m stupid, because I’m pretty.”

Donna shook her head, feeling her ponytail brush against the back of her neck. “Course they don’t. Nobody thinks that.”

To her surprise, Evangelista just shrugged. “No, they’re right though. I’m a moron, me. My dad said I have the IQ of plankton, and I was pleased.”

Donna laughed. “See, that’s funny.”

But Evangelista shook her head. “No, no, I really was pleased.” She paused, then looked at Donna hopefully. “Is that funny?”

“No, no.” Donna lapsed into silence. There wasn’t much more she could say to encourage the young woman. She wouldn’t join in with mocking her—she still remembered how it had felt when Lance had mocked her to the Doctor and Rose—but she finally had to admit the assistant was a bit dim. Thankfully, only a few seconds passed before books started flying off the shelf again, making conversation difficult.

The Doctor moved away from the terminal when books flew through the air a second time. Must be a bug in the system, he told himself as he hopped up on the circulation desk. Rose rolled her eyes, but when he grinned at her and patted the empty spot beside him, she boosted herself up and snagged his hand.

Across the room, Jenny raised an eyebrow at them. “All right, Dad, do you know what’s making the books go soaring off the shelves?”

“He’s the little girl?” Melody added quickly.

He looked at Rose, and it only took them a moment to come to an agreement. “The little girl is the data core,” he explained. “But what I don’t understand is what Cal is.”

“Ask Mr. Lux.” Melody gestured at the man standing behind her.

The Doctor shifted his gaze to man whose family had built the Library. “Cal, what is it?”

Mr. Lux pressed his lips into a smirk and shook his head. “Sorry, you didn’t sign your personal experience contracts.”

The Doctor looked at Melody, but she just shook her head. He jumped off the counter and crossed the room until he was standing almost nose-to-nose with the arrogant man.
“Mr. Lux.” The Doctor scowled down at the man who represented the worst of the mercenary attitude he hated. “Right now, you’re in more danger than you’ve ever been in your whole life. And you’re protecting a patent?”

Mr. Lux gritted his teeth. “I’m protecting my family’s pride,” he hissed.

The Doctor clenched his jaw as he attempted to maintain his temper. “Well, funny thing, Mr. Lux,” he said through gritted teeth, “I don’t want to see everyone in this room dead because some idiot thinks his pride is more important.”

“Speaking of idiots who think their pride is more important,” Melody said, amusement ringing in her voice, “why didn’t any of you sign the contract?”

The Doctor wheeled on Melody, but before he could snap at her, Rose put her hand on his arm. “She has a point, Doctor,” she said quietly. “I think it’s ridiculous too, but if it’s what we have to do to get home alive?”

He pressed his lips into a thin line and raked his hand through his hair, then finally blew out a loud breath through bared teeth. “All right,” the Doctor growled. “Get us your contracts.” He still didn’t like it, but hearing Rose frame it as a matter of life or death helped him regain a bit of perspective.

Miss Evangelista appeared with four copies of the contract, and they each signed one. As soon as they’d handed them back, the Doctor crossed his arms over his chest. “Tell me who Cal is,” he demanded.

Mr Lux nodded. “You were right, Doctor. The little girl is the computer core. CAL is Charlotte Abigail Lux, my grandfather’s youngest daughter.”

“Er, excuse me?” Miss Evangelista interrupted.

Mr. Lux shook his head, ignoring his assistant. “Not just now.” He sighed and ran his hand over his thinning hair. “She was dying, so he built her a library and put her living mind inside, with a moon to watch over her, and all of human history to pass the time. Any era to live in, any book to read.”

“Er, this might be important, actually,” Miss Evangelista said.

“In a moment,” Mr. Lux snapped. He closed his eyes and took a few deep breaths before continuing with his story. “She loved books more than anything, and he gave her them all. He asked only that she be left in peace.”

The Doctor pressed his tongue to the back of his teeth and remembered the little girl they’d seen on the video call. “So you weren’t protecting a patent. You were protecting her.”

Mr. Lux stretched his arms out, gesturing at the planet his grandfather had designed for his aunt. “This is only half a life, of course. But it’s forever.”

The Doctor nodded slowly. It was a common choice of the wealthy in the fifty-first century, saving a loved one’s consciousness to virtual reality. The notion had never sat quite right with him—would anyone really want to live forever in a computer programme?

But ethical questions aside, the truth of CAL was far more than the proprietary information he had expected. “I owe you an apology, Mr. Lux,” he said, feeling humbled. “I thought you were obsessed with losing money, but you were protecting your family’s pride—just like you said.”

Mr. Lux nodded. “I knew CAL’s secret might come out on this expedition, and my grandfather’s
dying wish was that his daughter would never be made into a freak show.”

A shrill scream interrupted the thoughtful atmosphere that had settled over the main reading room. The Doctor spotted the open panel in the wall right away and realised what must have happened. He snatched up a torch off the floor and raced through it, even though he knew they were already too late.

Miss Evangelista was nothing but a skeleton when they found her in a long, narrow room filled with tables and chairs. The muscle in the Doctor’s jaw twitched when he looked down at her, but he didn’t lose sight of the danger they were obviously in.

“Everybody, careful,” he warned as people crept forward towards the body. This room had less light than the main reading room, and shadows were everywhere. “Stay in the light.”

“You keep saying that. I don’t see the point,” Proper Dave argued.

The Doctor turned and pointed the torch at him, tired of his constant pushback. “Who screamed?”

Proper Dave rolled his eyes. “Miss Evangelista.”

The Doctor nodded. “Where is she?”

Melody reached for the communicator on the collar of her suit. “Miss Evangelista, please state your current…” Her voice echoed through the speaker on Miss Evangelista’s headset, and the Doctor watched her put the pieces together. “Please state your current… position.”

She got down on her knees and pulled the remnant of the collar around so they could see the green lights of the communicator. “It’s her,” she whispered, looking at the skeleton. She stood up and slowly stepped back. “It’s Miss Evangelista.”

“We heard her scream a few seconds ago,” Anita protested. “What could do that to a person in a few seconds?”

The Doctor shook his head. “It took a lot less than a few seconds.”

Jenny looked up at him. “What took less than a few seconds, Dad?”

“Hello?”

Even though he’d known it was coming when he saw the lights on the neural relay, the Doctor still shuddered when he heard Miss Evangelista begin to ghost.

Melody grimaced. “Ah, I’m sorry, everyone. This isn’t going to be pleasant.” She swallowed hard. “She’s ghosting.”

“What does that mean?” Rose asked, wrapping her arms around her waist.


“That’s, that’s her,” Donna gasped. “That’s Miss Evangelista.”

Proper Dave shuffled his weight from one foot to the other. “I don’t want to sound horrible,” he said—a sure sign he was about to say something horrible—“but couldn’t we just, you know?”

The Doctor glared at Dave, but Melody answered before he could. “This is her last moment. No, we can’t. A little respect, thank you.”
“Sorry, where am I?” the dead woman asked. “Excuse me?”

“I don’t understand,” Jenny said. “If she’s dead, how can she be talking to us?”

Melody drew a deep breath, then looked at Jenny, Rose, and Donna, all varying levels of confused. “It’s a data ghost. She’ll be gone in a moment.” She held her finger to the button on the communicator. “Miss Evangelista, you’re fine. Just relax. We’ll be with you presently.”

Despite all his questions about who Melody Pond actually was and if she really knew him and Rose, the Doctor felt a great deal of respect for the way the woman was ushering Miss Evangelista into a peaceful death.

“A data ghost…” Rose mumbled. “Jack told me about those once. It’s from the neural relay in the communicator, right, Doctor?”

He nodded, then looked at Donna and Jenny, who were both still completely confused. “See those green lights?” he said, pointing at the communicator. “That means the device is connected to her brain, allowing her to send thought mail. And sometimes… Sometimes it can hold an impression of a living consciousness for a short time after death. Like an afterimage.”

“My grandfather lasted a day,” Anita said. “Kept talking about his shoelaces.”

“You mean…” Jenny looked at the skeleton and shuddered. “You mean her mind is trapped in that communicator, and she doesn’t know she’s dead?”

“I can’t see. I can’t…” They all heard awareness creep into Miss Evangelista’s voice. “Where am I?”

“She’s just brain waves now,” Proper Dave explained. “The pattern won’t hold for long.”

“But, she’s conscious. She’s thinking,” Donna protested, her voice choked with tears.

“I can’t see, I can’t. I don’t know what I’m thinking.”

Rose and Jenny shifted closer to the Doctor, and he wrapped an arm around Rose’s shoulders. “She’s a footprint on the beach,” he explained to Donna. “And the tide’s coming in.”

“Where’s that woman? The nice woman. Is she there?”

“What woman?” Mr. Lux asked.

Donna looked at Miss Evangelista’s skeleton. She wanted to be sick, but the idea that her one conversation with the girl would have cemented her in her mind as nice… “She means…” She had to pause to swallow past the lump in her throat. “I think she means me,” she managed on the second try.

“Is she there? The nice woman.”

“Yes, she’s here,” Melody said. “Hang on.” She pressed a button on her suit, then nodded at Donna. “Go ahead. She can hear you.”

“Hello? Are you there?”

Tears were welling up in Donna’s throat, and she looked back at the Doctor, Rose, and Jenny, shaking her head.
“Help her,” the Doctor said quietly.

“She’s dead,” Donna whimpered, mourning the woman she’d only known for an hour.

Rose stepped out of the Doctor’s protective embrace to put a hand on Donna’s shoulder. “You can help her, Donna.”

“Hello? Is that the nice woman?”

Donna swallowed hard and stepped towards the skeleton. “Yeah. Hello. Yeah, I’m, I’m, I’m here. You okay?”

“What I said before, about being stupid. Don’t tell the others—they’ll only laugh.”

Tears spilled over, despite Donna’s best attempts at holding them back. That this would be her last thought—the awareness that her colleagues viewed her as a laughingstock, and wanting to make sure no one gave them more material.

“Course I won’t,” she promised, her voice hoarse. “Course I won’t tell them.”

“Don’t tell the others—they’ll only laugh.”

Donna shook her head, even though Miss Evangelista couldn’t see her. “I won’t tell them. I said I won’t.”

“Don’t tell the others—they’ll only laugh.”

“I’m not going to tell them.”

“Don’t tell the others—they’ll only laugh.”

“She’s looping now,” Melody explained. “The pattern’s degrading.”

Donna realised the lights on the communicator, which had been a solid green before, were flashing now.

“I can’t think. I don’t know, I, I, I, I scream. Ice cream. Ice cream. Ice cream. Ice cream.”

Melody looked at the group. “Does anybody mind if I…?” She gestured at Miss Evangelista’s body, and when no one protested, she reached down and pulled the comm unit off the suit and turned it off.

A sob shook Donna’s body, and she felt Jenny’s hand on her back. “That was, that was horrible,” she mumbled. It was tempting to turn around and let Jenny, or Rose, or the Doctor comfort her, but she stood straight and wiped the tears from her eyes. “That was the most horrible thing I’ve ever seen.”

“No. It’s just a freak of technology,” Melody countered. “But whatever did this to her, whatever killed her, I’d like a word with that.”

Donna heard the Doctor take a deep breath, and she finally turned around to look at him. There was a dark anger in his eyes that she’d only seen a few times before—when they’d liberated the Ood, and when Jenny had died in his arms. This time though, his anger didn’t scare her. Instead, she felt like maybe Miss Evangelista would get the justice she deserved.

He nodded once. “I’ll introduce you.”
Back in the main reading room, the Doctor tried to think of a way to demonstrate the Vashta Nerada as he pointed his torch into the shadows. He could find a live one with the sonic screwdriver, but that wouldn’t show people what the shadows could do.

Ah. Of course. “I’m going to need a packed lunch,” he called out, assuming the expedition team had brought food with them.

“Hang on.” Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Melody Pond reach into her bag.

The Doctor still had a hard time buying her story about being someone from their future. He crouched down beside her so he could question her without everyone overhearing.

“Who are you?”

Her hands shook minutely as she opened up her lunch. “Doctor Melody Pond, University of—”

“To Rose and me,” he qualified. “Who are you to us?”

It was a test. If she was really someone they knew, then he would have told her—they both would have told her—never to give away spoilers. Timelines had to be preserved, no matter how difficult it was.

Melody Pond swallowed, and for a moment, he thought he’d pressed too hard. Then she looked at him with her eyebrow arched and an amused smirk on her face. “Doctor, are you asking me to break the Laws of Time?” she teased. “Or… are you testing to see if I know them?”

He tugged on his ear, making her laugh.

“I can’t tell you who I am to you, but you already know that.” She handed him a box. “Chicken and a bit of salad. Knock yourself out.”

The Doctor stood up with the box lunch in one hand and the torch in the other. “Right, you lot.” He flipped the torch and caught it without looking. “Let’s all meet the Vashta Nerada.”

He got down on the floor with the torch in one hand and the sonic screwdriver in the other. Every shadow he saw, he buzzed with the sonic, trying to find one that was live.

Rose wasn’t idle. “So, while the Doctor is hunting, maybe we could get a little more background information,” she said. “What happened here? You said the Library had been silent for a hundred years. What happened on that day?”

From his spot on the floor, the Doctor shook his head and smiled. Rose was absolutely the best partner he could ask for. That same question had occurred to him earlier, but in between finding out about CAL and Miss Evangelista’s death, he’d forgotten to ask. He moved on to the next shadow, listening to Melody’s answer while he worked.

“There was a message from the Library,” Melody said. “Just one. ‘The lights are going out.’ Then the computer sealed the planet, and there was nothing for a hundred years.”

“It’s taken three generations of my family just to decode the seals and get back in,” Mr. Lux added.

Moving across the floor, scanning the shadows, the Doctor reached Proper Dave, standing right in his way. “Proper Dave, could you move please?”
It didn’t surprise him when the other man’s response was a surly, “Why?”

The Doctor pointed with the torch. “Over there, by the water cooler,” he clarified, not bothering to answer Proper Dave’s question.

When the man moved, the Doctor glanced back at Melody, anxious to hear more about the reason behind the expedition. She nodded and turned slightly towards Rose.

“There was one other thing in the last message,” she said.

The Doctor heard a rustling, and when he looked over his shoulder, Melody was reaching into the pocket of her space suit, pulling out a data pad. She beckoned, and Rose walked over to look over her shoulder.

“This is a data extract that came with the message.”

“Four thousand and twenty-two saved,” Rose read. “No survivors.”

*Four thousand and twenty-two saved… but no survivors?*

“Four thousand and twenty-two,” Melody took a deep breath. “That’s the exact number of people who were in the Library when the planet was sealed.”

“Wait a minute,” Jenny said. “What does it mean, four thousand and twenty-two people have been saved?”

“Yeah, who was saved if there were no survivors?” Donna agreed.

“That’s what we’re here to find out,” Melody explained.

“And so far, what we haven’t found are any bodies,” Mr. Lux added.

Not even the skeletons left behind when the Vashta Nerada devour the flesh, the Doctor realised, just as the sonic blinked.

“Okay, got a live one.” He jumped to his feet and pointed to the living shadow. “That’s not darkness down those tunnels. This is not a shadow.” He picked up the box lunch and crouched down in front of the shadow. “It’s a swarm. A man-eating swarm.”

He took a chicken leg and threw it into the darkness, and the meat was consumed from the bone before it hit the ground.

“The piranhas of the air. The Vashta Nerada. Literally, ‘the shadows that melt the flesh.’ Most planets have them, but usually in small clusters. I’ve never seen an infestation on this scale, or this aggressive.”

Rose swallowed hard. “By most planets, you mean including Earth.”

The Doctor stood up and brushed the wrinkles out of his suit. “Mmm. Earth, and a billion other worlds. Where there’s meat, there’s Vashta Nerada. You can see them sometimes, if you look. The dust in sunbeams.”

Donna shook her head, her eyes wide and pupils dilated. “If they were on Earth, we’d know.”

“Nah.” He wrinkled his nose and shook his head. “Normally they live on roadkill. But sometimes people go missing. Not everyone comes back out of the dark.”
“Every shadow?” Melody called out, interrupting his rambling.

“No.” The Doctor stuck his hands into his pockets and rocked back on his heels. “But any shadow.”

“So what do we do?” she asked.

And that was the problem. There was no way to fight the Vashta Nerada. “Daleks, aim for the eyestalk. Sontarans, back of the neck. Vashta Nerada? Run. Just run.”

*So your plan is to just leave? All of us?* Rose asked.

He took her hand. *My plan is to get us out of here alive. There’s no one here to rescue, except the ten of us.*

*You’re not even the least bit curious about those four thousand twenty-two people saved?*

The Doctor sighed and looked around the reading room. Dust motes danced in the shadows—or were they Vashta Nerada? He shuddered and looked back at Rose.

*Saved, but with no survivors,* he reminded Rose. *And a mystery isn’t worth risking your life, and Jenny’s and Donna’s.*

“Run? Run where?” Melody demanded.

“Hopefully, to safety,” the Doctor said. “This is an index point. There must be an exit teleport somewhere.”

He glanced at Mr. Lux, but the other hand shook his head. “Don’t look at me. I haven’t memorised the schematics.”

“Doctor, the little shop.” Donna pointed at the front of the room. “They always make you go through the little shop on the way out so they can sell you stuff.”

The Doctor let go of Rose’s hand and ran to the shop entrance and peered in, breathing a sigh of relief when he saw a teleport pad. “You’re right. Brilliant! That’s why I like the little shop.”

“Okay, let’s move it,” Mr. Lux ordered.

Proper Dave took a step towards the shop, and that was when the Doctor realised they were already too late to save everyone. “Actually, Proper Dave? Could you stay where you are for a moment?”

“Why?” the man demanded with all his trademark belligerence.

The Doctor walked towards him slowly. “I’m sorry. I am so, so sorry. But you’ve got two shadows.”

Everyone looked at the floor, where a Vashta Nerada had latched onto Dave, making it look like he had two shadows.

“It’s how they hunt,” the Doctor explained. “They latch on to a food source and keep it fresh.”

Proper Dave, who had previously been so dismissive of the Doctor’s orders to stay out of the shadows, was shaking slightly. “What do I do?”

“You stay absolutely still, like there’s a wasp in the room,” the Doctor said rapidly. “Like there’s a million wasps.”
“We’re not leaving you, Dave,” Melody said, meeting the Doctor’s gaze over his shoulder.

The Doctor shook his head quickly. “Course we’re not leaving him.”

At least…

The Doctor looked at Rose, and Jenny, and Donna. Three of the most important people in his life were in grave danger.

He squeezed his eyes shut. He couldn’t send Rose away, not without asking, and she wouldn’t agree if he did ask so there was no point. But Donna and Jenny…

He set the thought aside for the moment and looked at Proper Dave. “Where’s your helmet?” The man’s arm twitched, and the Doctor shook his head. “Don’t point, just tell me.”

Dave’s eyes shifted to his right. “On the floor, by my bag.”

Anita went to get the helmet, and the Doctor caught her eye as she got close to Proper Dave. “Don’t cross his shadow,” he ordered. She stepped carefully around the real shadow and brought the Doctor the white helmet that completed the environment suit. “Thanks. Now, the rest of you, helmets back on and sealed up. We’ll need everything we’ve got.”

“But we don’t have helmets, Dad.”

The Doctor glanced up at his daughter as he sealed Dave into the suit. “I know, Jenny.” The truth was, the suit was only going to offer minimal protection anyway, but he wasn’t going to say that out loud.

“Well then, how are you going to keep us safe, Spaceman?” Donna asked, fear making her voice sharp.

“Give me just a moment and I’ll tell you.”

He bit back a sigh when Rose narrowed her eyes at him; she would work out his plan in the next few minutes. Even if they hadn’t had a telepathic bond, Rose would have known what he was planning. Sending his companions away to safety was a habit too deeply ingrained to be abandoned entirely—especially when one of his companions was his own daughter. Memories of leaving Susan behind on Earth with David surfaced, but he quickly forced them back.

He shook his head slightly, then looked at Melody. “Melody, anything I can do with the suit?”

“What good are the damn suits?” Mr. Lux said, sounding panicked. He pointed towards the lecture room where they’d found the skeletal remains of his assistant. “Miss Evangelista was wearing her suit. There was nothing left.”

“We can increase the mesh density,” Melody suggested. “Dial it up four hundred percent. Make it a tougher meal.”

“Okay.” The Doctor pressed the sonic screwdriver to the control on the front of the suit. “Eight hundred percent. Can you finish everyone else, Rose?”

She nodded and went to Anita first. To the Doctor’s surprise, Melody turned to Other Dave and pressed a familiar looking tool to his suit.

The Doctor’s eyes widened. “What’s that?”
She looked at the screwdriver, then at him, mock confusion in her eyes. “It’s a screwdriver,” she said, playing dumb.

“Yeah, and it’s sonic,” the Doctor said.

She looked at the tool in her hand, and the smile on her face was almost laughter now. “Well look at that, so it is.”

The Doctor ground his teeth together and ignored the sassy archaeologist. He could focus on figuring her out later, after he saved Donna and Jenny.

He grabbed their hands and ran towards the shop. “With me. Come on.”

Rose’s eyes widened as he pulled the two women away from the group, but he ignored the sudden understanding and anger pulsing over the bond. He could handle her being angry with him much better than he could watching either Jenny or Donna die when he could have done something to save them.

“What are we doing?” Donna asked as they jogged through the shop, past the racks of souvenir merchandise. “We shopping? Is it a good time to shop?”

The knots in the Doctor’s stomach loosened when he spotted the teleport. He tried to run to the controls on the other side, but Jenny dragged her heels. The Doctor looked down at her. Her mouth was pressed into a thin line, and he realised she’d picked up just enough of his panic and Rose’s anger to figure out what he had in mind. He looked at her pleadingly, and she sighed and stepped onto the dais.

“What are we doing?” Donna asked as they jogged through the shop, past the racks of souvenir merchandise. “We shopping? Is it a good time to shop?”

“Come on, Donna,” he said to the woman who’d wandered off to look at the merchandise. “Right, stand there in the middle. It’s a teleport. Stand in the middle. Can’t send the others, TARDIS won’t recognise them.”

“What are you doing?” Donna demanded, her voice sharp with suspicion.

Jenny took her hand. “He’s sending us back to the TARDIS so we’re safe, Donna.”

Donna glared at Jenny. “Yeah, well I don’t see him or Rose wearing a spacesuit, so they’re in just as much danger as me and you.”

“Don’t worry, Donna.” Jenny took her hand. “The TARDIS will help me monitor what’s going on, and if we need to, we can come back to save them.”

Donna nodded. “All right then. As long as we’re not going to just sit there.”

Jenny looked at him over Donna’s shoulder. “We are definitely not just going to sit there.”

The Doctor rolled his eyes and slapped the button the teleport. “Like mother, like daughter,” he muttered as they disappeared. He should have known when Jenny stepped onto the dais willingly that she had a plan.

I didn’t trick them into going, he told Rose as he flipped the sonic screwdriver and put it back into his pocket. They agreed to go. There was a lot more to the story than that, but he didn’t have time to get into the rest of it, and this much was the truth. After a moment, her anger abated, and he relaxed slightly.

Melody called his name, and he ran back into the other room. He looked at her, then at where she
was pointing on the floor—to Proper Dave’s shadow. Shadow, singular.

“Where did it go?” the Doctor asked Melody.

“It’s just gone,” Proper Dave said. “I looked round, one shadow, see.” He pointed at the floor, where only one shadow stretched out from his body.

“Does that mean we can leave?” Melody asked. “I don’t want to hang around here.”

“I don’t know why we’re still here,” Mr. Lux added. “We can leave him, can’t we?” He pointed at Proper Dave. “I mean, no offence.”

The Doctor rolled his eyes. Would that statement pass the Felman Lux Decency Filters?

“Shut up, Mr. Lux,” Melody ordered, speaking for all of them.

Something wasn’t right about this. “Did you feel anything, like an energy transfer?” he asked Proper Dave. “Anything at all?”

“No, no, but look, it’s gone.” Proper Dave turned in a slow circle to demonstrate the lack of an extra shadow.

The Doctor held his hands up. “Stop there. Stop, stop, stop there. Stop moving.” Something was not right about this, and the way Proper Dave was moving, his shadow was bound to cross someone else’s. “They’re never just gone and they never give up.” He got down on the floor and sonicked the remaining shadow, but the results came back clean. “Well, this one’s benign.”

“Hey, who turned out the lights?” Proper Dave demanded angrily.

The Doctor looked up at Proper Dave’s back. “No one, they’re fine.”

“No seriously, turn them back on.”

“They are on,” Melody said.

“I can’t see a ruddy thing.”

A hard knot tightened in the pit of the Doctor’s stomach. Oh, I think I know where they’ve gone…

“Dave, turn around,” he said out loud.

“What’s going on?” asked Proper Dave as he turned slowly to face the Doctor. “Why can’t I see? Is the power gone? Are we safe here?” When the pilot turned around, the visor of his suit was completely dark.

Rose gasped. They got tired of just being his shadow and have moved into the suit, she realised. So why haven’t they eaten him?

The Doctor shook his head. Yet. The operative word is ‘yet.’

“Dave, I want you stay still. Absolutely still.” Dave’s body jerked, but the Doctor refused to believe what he knew that probably meant. “Dave? Dave? Dave, can you hear me? Are you all right? Talk to me, Dave.”

“I’m fine,” Dave said, and they all breathed a sigh of relief. “I’m okay. I’m fine.”

“I want you to stay still,” the Doctor repeated. “Absolutely still.”
“I’m fine. I’m okay. I’m fine. I can’t…”

The Doctor’s hearts sank when he realised that Dave wasn’t actually alive. He was just ghosting.


“He’s gone,” Melody said quietly when the communicator started blinking. “He’s ghosting.”

“Then why is he still standing?” For once, Mr. Lux asked an important question.

“Hey, who turned out the lights?” Proper Dave’s voice asked, and the Doctor realised that was the last thing the man had said before he’d been eaten by the swarm. “Hey, who turned out the lights?”

Two warring instincts battled in the Doctor. On one hand, Rose was right—the mystery was intriguing, and it was only getting deeper. How were the Vashta Nerada keeping the suit upright?

He took a step towards the suit formerly known as Proper Dave, then he stopped. On the other hand, there was nothing he could do for the dead man, and the longer they stayed in the Library, surrounded by Vashta Nerada, the greater the chances they would all join him.

“Doctor…”

He nodded and backed up. “I know, Rose.”

“Hey, who turned out the lights?”

The Doctor looked over at Melody. “I know you said you wouldn’t leave Dave behind…”

Her face was drawn in tight lines, but she shook her head firmly. “Proper Dave is gone,” she said, her voice betraying not a hint of indecision. “We’re still here—still alive.” She looked up at him, trust and fear both showing in her hazel eyes. “Can you get us to the TARDIS, Doctor?”

“Who turned out the lights?”

The Doctor’s head swung around just in time to see Proper Dave take a lurching step towards them. “Right everyone,” he said, taking a step backwards. “I think this would be a good time to run!”

They all spun around and realised simultaneously that they were trapped against a wall. “What do we do?” Mr. Lux moaned. “Where do we go?”

The Doctor heard a strange shuffling gait behind him and looked back at the suit, now one step closer.

“Doesn’t move very fast, does it?” Melody asked as they slowly backed away from the walking spacesuit.

“It’s a swarm in a suit. But it’s learning.” Proper Dave’s single shadow split into four shadows, each of them spreading in a different direction, looking for prey. The Doctor swallowed hard and reached for his sonic screwdriver. “Right, time to find a way out of here.”

Melody shook her head and pulled something out of her pocket. “Let me, Doctor. Everyone, duck.”

The Doctor just had time to recognise the weapon she carried before she fired it at the wall, making it disappear. “Squareness gun!”

“Good for getting out of a tough situation,” she said as she shoved it back into her pocket. “Go, go,
“Go,” she ordered, hurrying her team through the door she’d created. “Move it. Move, move. Move it. Move, move.”

Rose reached for the Doctor’s hand as they followed Melody through the opening. He was tense, and she squeezed his hand. *Jenny and Donna are safe,* she reminded him. *And we can find a way to get everyone else back to the TARDIS.*

The aisle of shelves they stepped into was almost completely in shadow, and they all paused. “You said not every shadow,” Melody protested.

“No, but it could be any shadow,” Rose reminded her.

“Hey, who turned out the lights?”

A cold feeling of dread settled in Rose’s stomach as the Vashta Nerada followed them through the opening Melody had created. The shadows were only a possible danger; Proper Dave was an active threat.

“Run!” the Doctor shouted.

He tightened his grip on Rose’s hand, and they followed Melody through the Library stacks. Behind them, the shuffling, zombie-like gait of the swarm soon faded, but they didn’t stop running until Mr. Lux nearly collapsed and Anita called out to stop them.

The lights here were working marginally better than they had been in the aisle they’d first entered, but even at that, the Doctor immediately grabbed a stool and went to work on them, turning the brightness up.

“Trying to boost the power. Light doesn’t stop them, but it slows them down.”

“So, what’s the plan?” Melody was bent over with her hands on her knees, trying to catch her breath. “Do we have a plan?”

“The plan is not to be eaten,” the Doctor said caustically. “So far, it has an 80% success rate. I’d like for that to not fall any lower.”

The fixture still wasn’t shining very brightly, so Rose pulled out her screwdriver to help. With two pointed at the light, they finally got it to work properly. She looked up at the Doctor as they worked, going from one light to the next. “You know I don’t like it when you send people away from their own good, but I have to admit, I’m glad Donna and Jenny are safe.”

To her surprise, his immediate response was not smugness or agreement. Instead, he looked at the sonic screwdriver with something like horror in his eyes.

“Doctor? What is it?” Rose asked.

“I teleported Donna and Jenny back to the TARDIS. If we don’t get back there in under five hours, Emergency Programme One will activate.”

“I can’t believe you still have that programme,” Rose muttered.

“Well, there’s not a setting for you,” he told her. “Since the TARDIS is your home.”

“We need to get a shift on,” Melody interrupted.

“No, you don’t understand.” The Doctor stared at his sonic screwdriver, and Rose’s gut tightened
when she realised what he was about to say. “They never made it to the TARDIS. I would have gotten a signal… she sends me a message when there’s a teleport breach.”

Rose grabbed the Doctor’s hand. “It’s not your fault, Doctor,” she said immediately. “Whatever happened, it’s not your fault.” He pressed his lips into a thin line and nodded once.

Melody cleared her throat. “Maybe the coordinates have slipped,” she suggested. “The equipment here’s ancient.”

With three hearts beating unnaturally fast, Rose and the Doctor spun around, looking for a Courtesy Node or a terminal. They found two Nodes standing almost side by side, and as they approached, the Doctor was already rattling off their request.

“Donna Noble and Jenny Tyler,” he barked. “They’re in this Library somewhere. Do you have the software to locate their position?”

Rose clapped a hand over her mouth when the nodes turned in unison, one of them bearing Donna’s face, the other Jenny’s. The two nodes spoke as one.

“Donna and Jenny have left the Library. Donna and Jenny have been saved.”

The Doctor reached up and touched Jenny’s face. “Still think this isn’t my fault, Rose?” he asked without looking at her.

“Donna and Jenny have left the Library. Donna and Jenny have been saved.”

Rose pulled the Doctor close and tried to comfort him over the bond, but the potential loss of Jenny and Donna—her step-daughter, and the woman who was like a sister to her—made it impossible.

“Donna and Jenny have left the Library. Donna and Jenny have been saved.”

“How’s that possible?” Melody asked.

“Donna and Jenny have left the Library.”

Rose glared up at the replicated versions of Donna and Jenny. “Yeah, we’ve got it,” she snarled. “You can stop now.” The courtesy nodes obediently fell silent, and Rose pressed her tear-streaked face into the Doctor’s chest while he nuzzled into her hair.

They stood like that for a few seconds, trying to be strong for each other and lean on each other at the same time. Then Rose heard it—the stomp-shuffle they’d left behind five minutes ago. She slowly pulled away from the Doctor to look behind him.

“Hey, who turned out the lights?”

She cursed fluently, and Melody grinned at her. “It’s a three language day,” she noted. “That’s our system for designating how bad a situation is—how many languages does it make Rose swear in?”

“Yeah, that’s hilarious, Melody,” Rose bit out. “But I’m a bit more concerned with running from the shadow zombie.”

“Hey, who turned out the lights?”

Rose grabbed the Doctor’s hand, and they ran from not-Proper Dave. Improper Dave? Rose thought, unable to stop a giggle at the inappropriate humour.
But her giggle died almost immediately, when she realised the shadows were closing in in front of them as well. “Doctor.”

“I see it.”

Melody skidded to a halt beside them. “How are we going to get out?”

Rose raised an eyebrow. “Well, you’re the one with the squareness gun,” she pointed out.

“Oh. Right.”

It was almost a relief to see that the calm, self-assured archaeologist could be flustered enough to forget how they’d gotten through the wall in the first place. Melody pulled her gun out and pointed it at the wall, and they all ran through the new opening, into a room that still had plenty of light.

The Doctor was trying to be calm, but Rose could feel his guilt and panic. She squeezed his hand as they ran. *They aren’t gone,* she insisted. *You can still feel Jenny in your head, can’t you?* She felt him reach out, and calm down a moment later when he recognised the faint telepathic signal that was Jenny. *We’ll find someplace safe and figure out how to bring them home. Do you hear me, Doctor? They will be safe.*

Chapter End Notes

Yes. Some changes afoot! And there's a blog post coming when we're through the Library section about how Moffat's Doctor tends to be stupidly reckless, even contradicting his own advice. The Doctor doesn't seek out danger, he seeks out adventure. Those aren't the same thing.
Jenny knew as soon as her dad hit the teleport button that something had gone wrong. Even as she caught a quick glance of the TARDIS console room, she felt a tug, like something had grabbed a hold of her and wasn’t going to let her into the ship. She heard Donna scream as she gritted her teeth against the sensation, and she hoped that either Donna had made it to the TARDIS, or that they’d be together, wherever they were going.

Ten seconds later, her eyes blinked open in a large, airy bedroom painted in soothing pastels. She looked down at herself, and instead of being dressed in her own jeans and t-shirt, she was wearing flannel pyjamas.

*What is going on? How did I get undressed and where am I?*

Jenny took a deep breath and closed her eyes, focusing on the telepathic presence of her father and Rose. They were still there in her mind, just like they should be.

Her dad had told her that if she were ever abducted or lost, she should reach out for him and Rose so they could start looking for her. When she’d asked the first question to come to mind—rather practical she thought, to wonder if it was possible to block telepathy—deep, remembered pain had echoed in her mind from both of them.

She’d quickly gathered that while it was possible, most people wouldn’t have the means or knowledge to do so. And lying in this strange bed, it only took her a moment to find their telepathic signatures and ask them to find her.

The heavy wooden door swung open, and Jenny jumped to her feet as a tall, bald, black man entered the room. She scanned him quickly, taking in the crisp white shirt and the placid smile on his face. His non-threatening posture did nothing to reassure Jenny, since, as far as she could tell, this perfect stranger had yanked her away from the safety of her home.

She crossed her arms over her chest. “Who are you, and how did you bring Donna and me here? Where’s the rest of my family?”

Brown eyes blinked behind rimless glasses. “I’m Doctor Moon. I’ve been treating you and your Aunt Donna since you came here.” He tilted his head. “What do you remember, Jenny?”

Jenny drew herself up and wished she had her boots on—they would have added a few inches to her petite size. She copied the way Rose would tilt her head back when people dared condescend to her and reached for the confident tone of voice her dad always managed.

“My name is Jenny Tyler. My dad and mum are the Doctor and Rose Tyler. We live on the TARDIS with our friend Donna.”

Doctor Moon circled her as she talked. “Interesting,” he mused quietly. “Integration seems to have failed entirely with you. I’ll have to try again.”

He walked back to the door and smiled at her. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Jenny.”

Jenny shook her head slowly after he left, trying to understand what had just happened. *Integration?*

She blinked, and when she opened her eyes, she was in a cafeteria. Doctor Moon sat across the table from her. “Hello, Jenny. I’m glad you could join me for coffee today. Are you feeling better than you
were yesterday?”

Jenny stared at him. “That was less than a minute ago, Doctor Moon. You left my room, I blinked, and then we were here.”

Doctor Moon pursed his lips. “No, Jenny. You’ve forgotten the last twenty-four hours. That’s a symptom of the trauma you received.” He gestured at her. “Look, you’re even wearing different clothes.”

Jenny glanced down and realised her hospital issue pyjamas had changed from red to blue-and-white plaid. She raised an eyebrow—she knew there was no way she’d been in the hospital for more than ten minutes.

“How could you possibly be so sure of that?” she asked, ignoring his lie. “You said I was in a room like mine. I’d like to see her.”

The doctor shook his head. “I’m afraid I can’t allow that, not when your mind is still so affected by your accident. Your Aunt Donna has had some false memories as well, and if the two of you met right now, you would only reinforce the fiction your damaged minds are trying to create.”

Jenny could feel her forehead scrunch up in a frown. “I’d really like to see her,” she pressed.

Doctor Moon smiled regretfully. “When you’re feeling better, we’ll see what we can arrange.” He looked down at the watch strapped to his wrist. “I’m afraid I need to cut today’s meeting short. I’ll see you tomorrow, though.”

Jenny watched him stand up and walk away, then she closed her eyes. When she opened them, she wasn’t surprised to find herself walking with the doctor across a plush lawn. A surreptitious look at herself revealed she was finally dressed in normal clothes, instead of pyjamas.

Her first instinct was to ask how they’d gotten outside, but then she remembered what Doctor Moon had said. If she wanted to make sure Donna was all right, she had to pretend to buy into the lie.

“It’s a lovely day for a walk,” she said, not commenting on the time or location at all.

She felt Doctor Moon looking at her, but she kept a smile on her face as she looked up at the sky. The sun didn’t even feel warm. How did they expect people to believe this was real?

“Have you had any more dreams?” he prodded. “About the Doctor and Rose, and the blue box you flew in through time and space?”

Jenny’s temper flared at the casual, condescending way he referred to her entire life. But she reminded herself that the goal today was to see Donna, and she shook her head. “No, Doctor Moon,” she said—and it wasn’t a lie. She hadn’t even slept, so how could she have dreamt?

Doctor Moon smiled. “It is a lovely day,” he agreed. “I’ve asked a nurse to bring Donna out, if you would like to talk to her.”

Jenny swung her gaze around to look at the doctor. “Yes, please!”

A second later, they were on the patio, sitting at a table sipping tea. Donna reached across the table and grabbed Jenny’s free hand. “I’m so glad you’re all right, Jenny,” she said. “This lot wouldn’t tell me anything about you, except that your head injury was worse than mine and it was taking you time to heal.”
It was hard to smile when Jenny knew Donna didn’t really know who she was, but somehow she managed it. “I’m doing so much better,” she promised Donna.

“As soon as they let us out of here, we’ll get a place together,” Donna promised her.

“I’d like that,” Jenny managed to say. She wanted to grab Donna and shake her until she remembered their real life on the TARDIS with the Doctor and Rose and all the running, but she just smiled instead.

“Donna,” Doctor Moon said, “would you like to go for a walk down to the river with me?”

Donna smiled beatifically and stood up. Then she looked at Doctor Moon, now wearing an overcoat and holding a bag of bread crumbs while ducks quacked noisily.

A steady breeze came off the water and they sun had slipped behind the clouds. Donna looked around, fighting her disorientation. “You said river, and suddenly we’re feeding ducks.” There was something not right, but she just… couldn’t put her finger on it.

“Doctor Moon. Morning.”

Donna turned and suddenly felt a little breathless when she spotted a man who was the epitome of tall, dark, and handsome walking towards them carrying fishing gear. And he’s got some meat on him, too, she thought, admiring his solid physique. Unlike that skinny bloke… She closed her eyes quickly and shoved the errant thought of the Doctor into the back of her mind before Doctor Moon could pick up on it.

“Donna Noble, Lee McAvoy.” Doctor Moon smirked, then moved off to the side. Donna smiled at the newcomer. “Hello, Lee.”

His eyes were warm when he smiled at her. “Hello, D, D, D…”

“Ooo, you’ve got bit of a stammer there.” She looked over at Doctor Moon. “Bless.”


Donna waved the attempts away with a hand. “Oh, skip to a vowel. They’re easy.”

What felt like just a second later, she was back on the hospital grounds with Doctor Moon. The sun had come back out, but it was still cold enough that she was comfortable in her winter coat.

Donna bit her lip as she looked up at the doctor. She thought she liked Lee, but no matter how hard she tried, she couldn’t remember anything about the rest of the afternoon.

“How did we leave it, him and me?

Doctor Moon smirked again. “I got the impression he was inviting you fishing tomorrow.”

oOoOoOoOo

The next twenty-five minutes were a nightmare and a headache for Jenny, as she watched Donna progress rapidly through her relationship with Lee McAvoy. Jenny had no real objections to Lee—he seemed perfectly nice—but was he even real? What if she and Donna got out of wherever they were, and Donna had fallen in love with someone who didn’t even exist?

But she couldn’t say a thing to warn Donna—Aunt Donna, she reminded herself—or she’d be back
in the hospital faster than you could say... well, most things.

Jenny looked around at the cosy bungalow she’d moved into sometime around minute eighteen in this strange, pocket universe. Her act had successfully fooled Doctor Moon, and he had declared her fully integrated and stopped visiting her, thankfully. It was harder than she’d thought to continue pretending in front of him.

Pretending was how she was allowed to be part of Donna’s life, though, and that let her offer some kind of protection, at least. Today, she was supposed to be going to Lee and Donna’s wedding, but she knew there wasn’t any reason for her to try to get ready, because in just a minute…

The pew was hard against her back and the pale blue dress didn’t fit well. But despite her discomfort and misgivings, it was almost impossible not to be happy for Lee and Donna as they ran up the aisle together.

Twenty minutes or eight years later, Jenny was sitting in her own garden, listening to the shouts of Donna’s children echoing over the wall. She pressed a hand to her forehead; how had this gotten so out of control?

Suddenly, she realised there was another person in her garden—a tall, veiled woman dressed all in black. Jenny jumped up and pressed her back to the wall. “Who are you?”

“You don’t need to be afraid of me, Jenny Tyler,” the woman said, and the voice was familiar. “You are not like anyone else who has been in this computer simulation.”

“Is that what it is, then?” Jenny looked around, and it all made sense. Everything was perfect. The computer could program them to skip time, and then Doctor Moon would fill in the gaps of what had happened with his narrative explanation.

“Yes. You are in the central computer of the Library. You remember the Library, don’t you, Jenny?”

Jenny pressed her lips together to withhold a sob. Even though less than an hour had passed since her dad had activated the teleport, sometimes it really did feel like she’d been trapped here for nine years. *Time is meaningless in the Vortex, Rose,* she remembered her dad saying more than once. She didn’t really think this was what he’d meant.

So after being trapped in a bizarre virtual reality for an hour, hearing someone else talk about the real world was almost more than she could handle. But the other woman was waiting for an answer, so she nodded. “Who are you?” she asked.

The woman tilted her head. “I think you know the answer to that, if you really think.”

Jenny stared at her, trying to place the voice. She’d heard that voice before… she’d heard that voice dying, she realised suddenly.

“Miss Evangelista!” she gasped.

“Yes, or at least, I am what’s left of her,” the woman said.

Jenny frowned and started to ask what exactly she meant by that. But then the air next to her flickered, and she watched a figure appear out of thin air—a figure she knew very well.

“Dad!”

He had his head bent down so he could listen to the sonic, but when he heard her voice, he looked
straight at her. “Jenny!”

She held out a hand and he ran towards her, but he disappeared before he reached her. Staring at the blank space where her father had been just a moment before, Jenny swallowed hard.

“How can we get out of here?” she asked Miss Evangelista.

After Rose reminded Melody of the squareness gun, she used it on every wall they came to. The Doctor crossed his fingers that it wouldn’t run out of battery power, though she didn’t seem to having the problem Jack did.

Finally, they reached a room with a large open space under the skylight, giving them plenty of light. “Okay, we’ve got a clear spot,” Melody announced, motioning for everyone to pile into the room.

The Doctor immediately let go of Rose’s hand and slid down to the floor, pointing the sonic at the shadows.

“In, in, in!” Melody continued. “Right in the centre. In the middle of the light, quickly. Don’t let your shadows cross. Doctor.”

“Oh it,” he replied, scanning for Vashta Nerada.

“There’s no lights here,” Melody said, pointing out what he’d noticed as soon as they entered the room. “Sunset’s coming. We can’t stay long.” The sonic flickered. “Have you found a live one?”

“Maybe. It’s getting harder to tell.” He tapped the sonic against his hand and scanned again. “What’s wrong with you?” he asked his tool.

Melody stood up and spun around. “We’re going to need a chicken leg. Who’s got a chicken leg? Thanks, Dave.”

A moment later, the Doctor watched a chicken leg fly through the air and hit the ground as only a bone.

“Okay,” Melody said as she stumbled backwards. “Okay, we’ve got a hot one. Watch your feet.”

“They won’t attack until there’s enough of them,” the Doctor said, brushing off her concern. “But they’ve got our scent now. They’re coming.”

You’re being rude, Rose told him gently as she rubbed his shoulders.

Behind their backs, both of Melody’s assistants were peppering her with questions—questions about them.

“So who are they?” Other Dave asked. “A group of people we’ve never met show up on our expedition, and we’re just supposed to trust them?”

“That’s the Doctor and Rose Tyler,” Melody said. “And yeah, you’re supposed to trust them.”

The Doctor stared into the shadows as he shamelessly eavesdropped on the conversation between Melody Pond and her team. I’m being rude? At least I’m not talking about her where she can hear me.

Only ‘cause she’s not telepathic, Rose retorted, and he glanced up to see her teasing grin.
The results from the sonic screwdriver were getting spottier. The Doctor tried pulsing the button to see if that would help while Mr. Lux asked Melody who he and Rose were.

*Oh, I feel so hurt that Mr. Lux isn’t impressed by our credentials,* Rose snarked.

“The only people I’d want with me in a life-and-death situation,” Melody shot back. “Trust me, there’s a reason I asked them to meet us here. If there’s anyone who can get us out of here alive, it’s them.”

The Doctor knew Rose was trying to make light of the situation, but as he watched Melody out of the corner of his eye, he couldn’t let it go. Listening to someone he’d never met talk about him and Rose as if she’d known them forever had been mildly curious before. Now that Donna and Jenny were gone because he’d followed this woman’s message to the Library, it was infuriating.

“You say they’re your friends, but they don’t even know who you are.”

The Doctor moved to the next set of shadows and nodded vigorously with Anita’s salient point. Exactly! They didn’t know who this woman was, so how could they trust her?

Melody looked up at him and shrugged when they made eye contact. She didn’t even look surprised that he was listening in. “Listen, all you need to know is this. I’d trust those two to the end of the universe.”

*Really?* the Doctor thought sarcastically. *And have you been to the end of the universe? Because I have, and you weren’t there.*

Stop snarking at Melody Pond and focus on finding Donna and Jenny, Rose ordered sharply, clearly tired of his sour disposition.

The Doctor shuffled over to the next set of shadows, but he didn’t get any better results there. *I’m trying, but something’s interfering with the sonic.*

“The Doctor doesn’t act like he trusts you,” Anita said astutely. “Rose might, but I don’t think he does.”

Melody tucked a strand of straight, brown hair back behind her ear. “Yeah, there’s a tiny problem. They haven’t met me yet, and the Doctor is extremely protective of his family.”

“What about Rose?” Anita asked.

They heard a smile in Melody’s voice when she answered. “Rose is extremely protective of the Doctor.”

*You have to admit she’s right about that,* Rose told him as she traded screwdrivers with him. They both heard Melody walk towards them, but ignored her while the Doctor tried Rose’s sonic on the shadows. To their consternation, her screwdriver seemed to be having the exact same problem.

“What’s wrong with it?” Melody asked.

The Doctor ignored her, tapping the screwdriver lightly and tried it again, but the violet diode only flickered briefly.

Rose sighed and looked at Melody. “There’s a signal coming from somewhere, interfering with it.”

Melody nodded once. “Then use the red settings.”
The Doctor’s gaze flicked over to her, then he went back to fiddling with Rose’s sonic. “It doesn’t have a red setting.”

“Well, use the dampers,” she said as she took her gloves off.

“It doesn’t have dampers.” The Doctor was already disinclined to be civil towards this woman who claimed to be from their future, and the way that she was now pretending to know everything about his sonic screwdriver, the tool he had designed and perfected over the years, grated.

She pulled the sonic screwdriver she’d used earlier out of her pocket. The diode that had been blue now looked red. “Hmmm. I guess mine has a few extra features then,” she said.

The Doctor snatched it from her hands and stood up. “So, some time in the future, I just give you my screwdriver.”

She snatched it back. “No. At some point in the future, you give me my own screwdriver.”

He rocked back on his heels and glared at her. “Why would I do that?”

“Present when I graduated from uni,” she said breezily. A hint of nostalgia entered her voice, but her smile was still smug, like she knew something they didn’t. “I’d always wanted one, but I’d never dared to ask. And then you came up to me, just the two of you, and said you had a special gift for me.” She arched an eyebrow. “I guess this is when I told you I wanted a sonic screwdriver.” A smirk crossed her face. “You know, if you’d told me before that this was what you meant when you said time travel had its up sides, I might have been more interested.”

The Doctor’s agitation washed over Rose, and combined with her own worry for Jenny and Donna, her temper sparked. She stepped in between the Doctor and Melody, standing with her feet shoulder width apart and her arms crossed over her chest.

“Oi! Leave ‘im alone!” The Doctor put a hand on her arm, and Rose took a deep breath but didn’t back down. “You just told Anita and Other Dave that I’m protective of the Doctor, and now you’re teasing him for your own amusement when you can tell how upset he is?”

Melody opened and closed her mouth, then shook her head.

Rose sighed, and some of her anger drained out of her. “I know you’re upset and stressed and this has got to be difficult for you, when you were thinking you’d get the versions of us that you know. But we just lost our daughter and our friend.” Her voice cracked and she swallowed hard. “Neither of us are in the mood for jokes right now.”

The smirk disappeared from Melody’s face. “You’re right. I’m sorry, both of you.” She smiled wryly at Rose. “I’ve never been on the receiving end of one of your protective tirades. Think I’ll try to avoid it happening again.” She blinked rapidly as she turned back around to the rest of her expedition crew.

There was a short, awkward pause, then the Doctor held up Rose’s screwdriver. “Know what’s interesting about our screwdrivers?” he asked as he started walking in circles around the group.

“Very hard to interfere with. Practically nothing’s strong enough. Well, some hairdryers,” he allowed as he looked up at the skylight. “But I’m working on that. So there is a very strong signal coming from somewhere, and it wasn’t there before. So what’s new? What’s changed?”

“The moon is up,” Rose said immediately. “I noticed it when I looked through the skylight when we walked into this room. There wasn’t a moon in the sky before, and now there is.”
The Doctor spun around and bounced on his toes. “Oh, very good, Rose!” He turned and looked at Mr. Lux. “Tell me about the moon. What’s there?”

The company president shook his head. “It’s not real. It was built as part of the Library. It’s just a doctor moon.”

“What’s a doctor moon?” he pressed.

“A virus checker,” Mr. Lux explained. “It supports and maintains the main computer at the core of the planet.”

“So it’s there to make sure that CAL is safe,” the Doctor mused. Now that he knew what to look for, he could scan for a connection between the planet and the moon. Unlike his attempts to scan for Vashta Nerada, that worked almost immediately.

“Well, still active. It’s signalling. Look.” The sonic’s steady buzz pulsed slightly as it picked up the signal from the moon. “Someone somewhere in this library is alive and communicating with the moon. Or, possibly alive and drying their hair.” The Doctor put his screwdriver to his ear, listening to the signal. “No, the signal is definitely coming from the moon. I’m blocking it, but it’s trying to break through.”

He twisted the top of the screwdriver and heard a funny pop, then a very familiar voice called out, “Dad!”

The Doctor looked up up, and his throat caught when he saw a flickering projection of his daughter. “Jenny!” he called back, pushing her name past the lump in his throat. He ran towards the projection, but it disappeared just as he reached it.

He stared at the blank spot, blinking back tears. A moment later, Rose wrapped her arms around his waist and hugged him tight. *She’s there, love*, one of them said, though he couldn’t tell right now if the thought was his or hers. *Jenny’s there, and she’s fine.*

Rose pulled back and wiped tears from her eyes. “Can you get her back?” she whispered hoarsely.

“I can try,” the Doctor said, his voice thick. His hands were shaking when he raised the sonic to his ear, but they were steady enough to adjust the settings, trying to lock onto the frequency coming from the moon. *Please, let me see Jenny again,* he pleaded with the universe.

But it seemed like the universe wasn’t listening. No matter what he tried, he couldn’t interfere with the signal between the doctor moon and the planet.

He growled and tapped the sonic on the heel of his hand. “I’m being blocked!”

“Doctor Pond?” Anita said, a tremble in her soft voice.

“Just a moment,” Melody replied. The Doctor heard the buzzing from her screwdriver and realised she was trying to locate Jenny, too.

“It’s important,” Anita insisted. “I have two shadows.”

The Doctor’s stomach fell when he spun around and saw that the young archaeologist did indeed have two shadows.

“It didn’t do Proper Dave any good,” Anita pointed out practically.

Melody shook her head. “Just keep it together, okay?”

Anita rolled her eyes and snorted. “Keeping it together. I’m only crying. I’m about to die. It’s not an overreaction.”

No one could argue with that, so Melody was silent as she put the helmet on the scared woman and did up the seal.

“Hang on.” Using the sonic, the Doctor turned the filter on the visor all the way up, making it black.

Melody gasped. “Oh God, they’ve got inside.”

“No, he just tinted her visor, Melody,” Rose explained. “But why, Doctor?”

The Doctor shrugged. “Well, I thought maybe they’ll think they’re already in there, leave her alone.”

“Do you think they can be fooled like that?” Melody pressed.

The Doctor pressed his lips into a thin line. The constant questioning was grating on his nerves.

“Maybe. I don’t know. It’s a swarm. It’s not like we chat.”

“Can you still see in there?” Other Dave asked.

Anita nodded. “Just about.”

When the Doctor turned around to look at Other Dave, he noticed something they’d all missed. A seventh figure, standing in the shadows.

Other Dave and Mr. Lux both took a step forward, and the Doctor waved his hand for them to stay still. The last thing they needed was for the shadows to cross, spreading the infestation.

“Just, just, just stay back.” Then he took Rose’s hand and looked at Melody. “Rose, Melody. Could I have a word, please?”

Both women frowned, but nodded, and they took three steps away from Anita, careful to stay in the light.

The Doctor lowered his voice. “All right, both of you. Without being obvious, I need you to take a quick head count.”

He watched them casually glance around the room before they looked back at him. “Seven,” they whispered in unison.

“Right. That’s the three of us, Anita, Other Dave, Mr. Lux, and…”

Their eyes widened.

“Hey, who turned out the lights?”

“Run!” the Doctor ordered, and the six still-living people raced out of the room, chased by the form of Proper Dave.

oOoOoOoOo
The Doctor led the group to the stairs, thinking they might be harder for the swarm in a suit to navigate. Sunlight streamed in through the windows, keeping them safe from other shadows as they climbed over two dozen flights.

Finally, they reached a floor that indicated a skybridge could be found on this level. “This way,” he said in a low voice, straining his ears for the shuffle-clomp of the Vashta Nerada, several storeys below them.

They ran through the sky bridge from one skyscraper to another. The Doctor slammed the heavy wooden doors shut behind them and hustled everyone towards the stairs, but some twinge of curiosity caught Rose’s attention, and she stopped and looked at him while Mr. Lux and Anita ran on.

His eyes were bright with anger and curiosity as he stared back at the closed doors. It only took a moment for Rose to figure out what he wanted to do.

She looked at Melody, who’d slowed down when they’d stopped. “Keep running. We’ll be right behind you.” Melody looked hesitantly at the two of them, then nodded sharply. “Mr. Lux, Anita, Other Dave—stay with me,” she barked, then ran for the door marked ‘Stairwell.’

From behind them, the shuffling noise of the swarm-in-a-spacesuit got louder, and Rose mentally counted off the minute or so she reckoned they could stay there safely.

“Rose…”

She cut him off with her hand held up. “No. I sent them away because every second counts. But you’re not going to stay here with that… You said the only thing to do with Vashta Nerada was to run, Doctor.”

“I know, but…” He looked at her, then back at the doors, just as they burst open. “Why did they come to the Library to hunt?”

“Hey, who turned out the lights?”

Rose rolled her eyes. “Does it matter?” she asked. “Would finding out how they got here and why get us any closer to the TARDIS? Would it help us find Jenny and Donna?” She held out her hand for the Doctor, and he took it. “Come on. Let’s get out of here.”

“Hey, who turned out the lights?”

The Doctor looked over his shoulder at the Vashta Nerada, just crossing the threshold of the room. Rose’s heart stopped until he looked back at her, and she could see the decision in his eyes. She let out a slow breath when he took her hand.

“Thank you.”

With the Doctor’s hand in hers, they raced down the stairs. “I’m still curious about where they came from, but you were right,” the Doctor admitted as they ran. “It wouldn’t make a difference in the end.”

Rose squeezed his hand. “I’m curious too,” she panted as they turned a corner. “But I’d rather spend our time finding Jenny and Donna and getting the hell out of here.”

The Doctor snorted. “Right you are.”
They both looked out the window as they reached the ground floor of the building. The sun had very nearly set by now, which would make it almost impossible to avoid the shadows.

“I don’t know how we’re going to make it out of this,” the Doctor admitted finally.

Rose pulled him to a stop. “Don’t,” she said sharply. “Don’t talk about giving up, not…” She took a deep breath and smiled up at him. “Have you forgotten, Doctor? We’re the stuff of legend.”

It was all bravado, and they both knew it. There was a significant likelihood that they would not make it out of this adventure alive. The possibility of regenerating teased the edges of Rose’s mind, but she could tell by the level of the Doctor’s fear that it probably wouldn’t be possible if they were consumed by Vashta Nerada.

She shook her head and rested her hands on his elbows. “We are going to rendezvous with Melody and her team, we’re going to find Jenny and Donna, and we are going to make it home,” she said firmly. “That’s the only conclusion to this day that I will accept. All right?”

The Doctor smiled, then pulled her close. “And I reckon even the Vashta Nerada don’t dare thwart your wishes,” he said, his voice muffled by her hair.

Rose nodded. “Exactly. Now, are you ready to find Melody?”

He kissed her quickly, then took her hand. “Oh, I’m ready.”

They found Melody, Anita, Other Dave, and Mr. Lux back in the main circulation area, where he had first explained the Vashta Nerada only a few hours before. Melody was crouched on the floor, using her sonic screwdriver to scan the Library seal in the middle of the floor.

None of them heard the Doctor and Rose enter the room silently from the mezzanine level, so the Doctor took advantage of the moment to shamelessly eavesdrop.

“You know, it’s funny,” Melody said as she checked the results of her scan. “I keep wishing the Doctor and Rose were here.”

“The Doctor and Rose are here, aren’t they?” Anita said. “They are coming back, right?”

Melody sighed and pushed herself to her feet. “You know when you see a photograph of someone you know, but it’s from years before you knew them. And even though it’s them, there’s something just… missing. A familiarity that isn’t there yet.”

Rose squeezed the Doctor’s hand. Like meeting your first incarnation, she told him. It was the first time meeting you since meeting you the first time when you looked at me without knowing me.

Down below, Melody continued her explanation. “Well, yes, the Doctor and Rose are here. They came when I called, just like they always do.”

The Doctor raised his eyebrows and filed that piece of information away.

“But they aren’t the Doctor and Rose who pick me up every year for Christmas. Last year, we had dinner at the Tylers’, but they don’t know that Jackie spiked the punch with ginger ‘because it just isn’t fair that himself doesn’t get drunk like the rest of us.’” Anita laughed, and Melody nodded. “You see what I mean? They’re here… but they aren’t.”
Rose’s hand had tightened around his at the mention of her family, and the Doctor pulled her close. “Spoilers,” he warned, unable to keep the bite out of his voice. If Melody wasn’t who she said she was… if she was just playing them and she’d just given Rose false hope of seeing her mother again…

Rose reached up and stroked his jaw. Don’t get so upset before we know, she chided. You can be my protector later, if it’s necessary.

Melody’s expression was stricken, though, and for the first time, the Doctor really believed she was who she claimed to be. “How much did you hear?” she whispered.

Her guilt was obvious, and now that he’d allowed the possibility that she truly was someone from their future, he could more fully appreciate how difficult this would be for her. Meeting someone you obviously knew very well before they had even met you was a tricky tightrope to walk, and he’d clearly impressed upon the young woman the importance of maintaining the timelines.

Impulsively, he jogged down the stairs and pulled her in for a reassuring hug. “It’s fine, Melody,” he promised. “A little foreknowledge won’t damage the timelines.”

She drew a shaky breath and looked up at him. “Yeah?”

“Yes! And I’ll let Jackie get me drunk, even though I know it’s going to happen.”

Melody rolled her eyes and shoved him away from her, and he knew everything was going to be fine.

He turned and looked at the rest of the group—Mr. Lux and Other Dave, looking scared as they hovered awkwardly in the space between the shadows and Anita, who still had two shadows.

“How are you doing?” he asked her as he walked over to her.

“Still alive,” she said, a hint of defiance in her voice. “But Doctor. Proper Dave only lasted what, five minutes after they latched onto him? How come they haven’t taken me yet?”

“I don’t know.” The Doctor looked at her two shadows. “Maybe tinting your visor’s making a difference.”

Anita snorted softly. “It’s making a difference all right. No one’s ever going to see my face again.”

Her grim pragmatism made him wish he could do something for her, and despite the fact that he really couldn’t, he found himself asking, “Can I get you anything?”

“An old age would be nice,” she quipped, and her brave wit in the face of death made this hurt even more. “Anything you can do?”

The Doctor nodded, even though she couldn’t really see him. “I’m all over it,” he promised. If there was any way he could persuade the Vashta Nerada to let go of Anita, he would do it.

“Look at us,” Rose said, and he silently thanked her for changing the subject. “Six of us, still safe after running from the Vashta Nerada for two hours.”

The Doctor grinned and stuck his hands into his pockets. “Yep, still safe…” He lingered on the word. It felt significant, and he quickly filtered through his memory of all the times in the last two hours that he’d heard the word “safe” or any variations of it.
“What is it, Doctor?” Melody asked.

“Safe.” As he repeated the word, the thought finally unlocked. “You don’t say saved,” he explained, his mind still working out the ramifications of his realisation as he talked. “Nobody says saved. You say safe.” He spun to point at Mr. Lux. “The data fragment! What did it say?”

“Four thousand and twenty-two people saved. No survivors.”

“Doctor?” Rose asked.

“Oh, it’s been staring us in the face, Rose!” He grabbed her and spun her around. “Because people don’t get saved, not unless you’re talking about the preachers on street corners. But computers—computers save things. And that’s what it did. It saved them.”

oOoOoOoOo

Something about the world was wrong. Donna usually managed to shove that faint awareness into the back of her mind, but a moment ago, when she’d been talking to Doctor Moon, it had flared to life for just a few seconds.

Now, as she made tea for her guest, she felt like she’d forgotten something really important. It felt like she’d had it, just for a second, and then it had been lost again.

She sighed when the tea was done and shrugged her shoulders. I’m not going to figure it out by standing in the kitchen, she told herself as she picked up the cups and walked back to the living room.

“Here we are, Doctor Moon.”

Donna’s smile faded into a confused frown when the doctor was nowhere to be seen. Ella and Joshua ran through the room, and she held the teacups up to keep them from getting bumped into.

“Mummy, I made you!” Ella held up a thick body made of plasticine with two arms, two legs, and no face.

“Oh, that’s nice, Ella,” Donna said. She was determined to praise her daughter’s artistic endeavours, rather than belittling them like her own mother had. But... “Where’s the face?” she couldn’t help but ask.

Ella looked down at the doll and shrugged. “I don’t know.”

Donna sighed and carefully bent over to put the teacups down on the coffee table. “Did you see Doctor Moon? Did he leave?”

Before Ella could answer, the door swung open and Lee stepped inside, wearing his regular suit and carrying a briefcase. The kids went crazy, calling his name and running to him, and for the briefest moment, Donna thought that the timing of his arrival was certainly convenient, the way it interrupted any answer Ella might have given her.

That cynical thought disappeared when she watched her husband set his briefcase down and open his arms to their children. “Hey! Hello, you two. Come here. Big hugs. Big Daddy hugs.”

“Look what I made.” Ella held up her doll.

“Oh.” Lee looked at it, then glanced at Donna, his eyes dancing. “It’s Mummy.”
“Uh, it hasn’t got a face,” Donna pointed out again. There was something off-putting about the idea of her face being… taken, and try as she might, she couldn’t let it go. “Did you see Doctor Moon?” she asked, wanting to change the subject.

“No. Why, was he here?” asked Lee.

“Yeah, just a second ago.” Donna walked over to the window. “You must have passed him.”

She pulled the curtains back, expecting to see the tall figure of Doctor Moon, maybe disappearing around the corner. Instead, she spotted a flash of black lace as what looked like a veiled woman in a long, black dress walking behind a tree.

“You all right?”

Lee sounded a little worried now, and despite Donna’s growing feeling that something was wrong, her reassurance was automatic.

“Yeah. Yeah, I’m fine,” she said as the last of the woman’s train disappeared. “It’s just…”

“Just?” Lee murmured in her ear.

The quiet neighbourhood Donna had always loved suddenly seemed eerie. Wind blew clouds in, and the sun slanted in at the wrong angle for the time of day. Even the birds were quiet.

Donna sighed and shook her head. “Nothing.” She turned around and wrapped her arms around her husband. “It’s been a long day, that’s all.” She pulled back and smiled up at him. “I’m just tired.”

She blinked, and she and Lee were in their bedroom, dressed for bed. The feeling that the world was wrong strengthened, and she shook her head, hoping to either get rid of it, or get more insight into why it seemed so wrong.

Lee put his hand on her arm. “You okay?”

Donna felt a hint of panic welling up inside her as she tried to remember exactly what they’d done for the evening. She hadn’t had this many problems with her memory since she’d been released from the hospital, and the idea that she might have to go back terrified her.

“I said I was tired,” she began slowly, trying to remember what had happened next. “And, and… we put the kids to bed, and we watched television.” The memories came as she talked, and the knot of tension in her stomach had eased by the time she finished.

Lee smiled at her, and Donna was just about to suggest they get into bed when they heard the distinctive sound of the mail slot being pushed open.

Donna looked over her shoulder at their open bedroom door, then back at Lee. “Was that a letter?” she asked.

Lee shook his head. “It’s midnight.”

Donna pushed him gently towards the bedroom door. “Go and see what it is,” she requested urgently.

He sighed, but left the room, patting her shoulder reassuringly on his way by. After he was gone, Donna stared at the red accent wall behind their bed for a moment, wondering yet again what had led her to paint it that way. It had felt familiar and right, somehow.
She shook the thought off and wandered over to the window. If someone had dropped a letter in the slot, maybe she could catch a glimpse of them as they walked away.

The flash of lace was familiar. This definitely seemed like the dress she’d seen earlier in the afternoon, though this time, she caught a much better glimpse of it, enough to see that it was a Victorian gown, with a bustle and train.

“The world is wrong.”

Donna’s skin tingled when she heard the words she’d been thinking from Lee’s lips. She dropped the curtain and looked back at him.

“What?”

He held up a letter. “For you. Weird, though,” he added, raising his eyebrows before reading the entire note. “Dear Donna, the world is wrong. Meet me at your usual play park, two o’clock tomorrow.”

Donna looked out the window again, and Lee wrapped his arms around her waist and looked over her shoulder as they watched the woman in black walk away.

“Nutter,” she muttered, earning a laugh from Lee.

Still… the world was wrong, and despite the tremor of foreboding she felt when she considered what the woman might have to say, Donna needed to know if she actually knew something, or if she just liked dropping notes in letterboxes at half twelve at night.

The rest of the night and the morning passed in an instant, and the next thing Donna knew, she was walking hand in hand with Ella and Joshua to the big park down the road. She brushed off the part of her that wondered when she’d decided what to wear, and if she’d had coffee or tea with her breakfast, and even how she and the kids had gotten to the park. Those weren’t important questions.

She spotted a woman dressed in full Victorian mourning, completely with veil, sitting on a weathered park bench. Donna took a deep breath and nodded once, then looked down at her kids.

“All right, you two, off you go,” she told them. “No fighting,” she added as they raced off to play with the other kids.

She watched for a moment, and when she was satisfied they were having fun, she turned back to the woman and slowly circled the playground equipment until she was able to sit down beside her.

“I got your note last night.” It was cold enough that Donna could see her breath when she talked. “The world is wrong. What’s that mean?”

“No, you didn’t,” the woman said.

Something about the voice sounded familiar, but Donna ignored it in favour of addressing the direct contradiction she’d just received.

“I’m sorry, what?”

“You didn’t get my note last night,” the woman elaborated. “You got it a few seconds ago. Having decided to come, you suddenly found yourself arriving.”

Donna sucked in a breath, thinking about all the times she’d felt like time had just magically passed,
all the times she’d had to struggle to remember how she’d gotten from one place to another.

The woman’s head tilted. “That is how time progresses here, in the manner of a dream. You’ve suspected that before, haven’t you, Donna Noble?”

She added emphasis to her name, but it wasn’t necessary. Hearing someone she’d never met address her by name was enough of a shock.

“How do you know me?” Donna demanded. The world was wrong. This was all wrong.

“We met before, in the Library.” It was strange listening to someone talk when she couldn’t see their lips moving. “You were kind to me. I hope now to return that kindness.”

“Your voice. I recognise it.” Flashes of memory returned to Donna, moments Doctor Moon had told her were only dreams and hadn’t really happened. But this voice had been in those dreams, calling her the nice woman.

The woman turned slowly to look directly at her. “Yes, you do. I am what is left of Miss Evangelista.”
Rose smiled at the Doctor as he bounced and spun around the reading room. Figuring something out had soothed his earlier fatalistic outlook, though of course he would be happier if he could figure out where the Vashta Nerada came from.

She pivoted in a slow circle as she turned that particular mystery over in her mind. The one thing she’d picked up from the Doctor about the life cycle of the Vashta Nerada was that they laid their eggs in trees.

She laid her hand on the carved railing of the staircase. There was a lot of wood in the Library, she mused—much more than she’d imagined in a building so futuristic. It was almost as surprising as the paper books.

*Oh.*

Paper. Paper made from trees, which had been cut down from a forest somewhere.

“Doctor,” she said quietly, using the bond to get his attention rather than volume. He wheeled around and looked at her. “I think I’ve figured out where the Vashta Nerada came from.”

His eyes widened. “Where? They hatch in forests, and this entire planet is a city.”

Rose shook her head. “No, this entire planet is a forest.” She lifted her hands and turned slowly, pointing at the shelves. “You said all the books here were printed specially for the Library. Which means they were printed at once, likely on paper made from the same batch of wood pulp… cut down from the same forest.”

“Oh,” he whispered, turning in a circle. “These are their forests.”

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Miss Evangelista stood up while Donna was still grappling with her memories and gestured to the walk that encircled the playground. “Shall we?” she asked, sounding exactly like the genteel Victorian lady she looked like.

“Mind if I join you?” another familiar voice asked as they stood up.

Donna spun around to look at her niece. “Jenny! What are you doing here?”

Jenny looked at her steadily, and Donna cringed when she saw something sad in the younger woman’s eyes. “Miss Evangelista and I talked earlier,” she explained. “And we agreed that this would be the best way to show you.”

“To show me what?” Donna looked back and forth between the two women, her temper sparking. “Listen, you,” she snarled at Miss Evangelista. “I don’t know who you are, but my niece had a very serious brain injury. If you’ve been messing with us both…”

“She is not your niece,” Miss Evangelista said calmly. “Think, Donna. Remember the person you were when you knew me before.”
Jenny put a hand on her shoulder. “Just... listen for a little bit longer, Donna, all right?” she pleaded. “If we get to the end, and you still think we’re bonkers, you can tell Doctor Moon I’ve relapsed and we won’t ever mention it again.”

Donna pressed her lips into a thin line and took a deep breath through her nose. “All right then. Talk fast.”

Miss Evangelista pointed at the children playing as the trio started their walk. “I suggested we meet here because a playground is the easiest place to see it,” Miss Evangelista explained. “To see the lie.”

“What lie?” Donna demanded. She could hear her children shrieking happily as Miss Evangelista tried to dismantle her whole world, and it made her even more snappish than usual.


But Donna couldn’t look away from Miss Evangelista. She told herself she was fascinated by the woman’s veil, but deep down, she knew she was terrified of what she’d see if she looked at the playground.

“Why do you wear that veil?” she asked. “If I had a face like yours, I wouldn’t hide it.”

“You remember my face, then?” Donna couldn’t be certain, but she thought Miss Evangelista was smiling behind the veil. “The memories are all still there. The Library, the Doctor, me. You’ve just been programmed not to look.”

Donna slowed down as an awful memory returned—the memory of this young woman, talking to her through death. “Sorry, but you’re dead.”

Miss Evangelista turned and looked straight ahead. “In a way, we’re all dead here, Donna,” she said, with the calm only the dead can achieve when talking about death. “We are the dead of the Library.”

“Well, what about the children? The children aren’t dead.” Donna looked at the playground, and something seemed off. The world is wrong. She pushed the thought aside and looked back at Jenny. “My children aren’t dead.”

She hated that there was even a hint of question in her voice.

Jenny pursed her lips and shook her head. “Ella and Joshua aren’t real, Donna.”

Donna waved her arms at Jenny, her body shaking with fear and anger. “Don’t you say that. Don’t you dare say that about my children!” She gestured at the playground where she could hear Ella and Joshua playing. “You were there when they were born! You held them!”

Jenny’s eyes, usually bright blue with excitement or happiness, now looked like the sky right before a storm. “Was I, Donna?”

“Look at your children,” Miss Evangelista interrupted. “Look at all of them, really look.”

Donna spun around to tell the other woman where she could take all of her comments about things being wrong, but as she did, her gaze landed on the playground, and she finally saw it. One little boy and one little girl, repeated over and over. Wearing the same coats, laughing with the same childish giggles, smiling the same toothy smiles.

“They’re not real,” Miss Evangelista pressed in a low voice. “Do you see it now? They’re all the same. All the children of this world, the same boy and the same girl, over and over again.”
“Stop it. Just stop it. Why are you doing this?” Donna glared at the other woman, who wouldn’t even let her see her face. “Why are you wearing that veil?”

Jenny watched with morbid curiosity when Donna yanked the veil off. She’d wondered the same question, but had managed to curtail the impulse to ask, thinking that Rose would call the question rude. Donna didn’t have Jenny’s mum’s voice in the back of her head, though, and obviously felt no compunction about unveiling their mysterious friend.

The loud gasp Jenny let out when Miss Evangelista’s face was revealed was quiet compared to Donna’s yell. With one eye three times the size of the other and the crooked mouth, it looked like someone had melted her face.

She looks like a Picasso, Donna thought, just barely managing to stem the hysterical laughter rising up.

Miss Evangelista readjusted her veil, then looked at them calmly while they gathered their wits again. “What happened to your face?” Jenny asked finally.

The young woman shrugged wryly. “Transcription errors. Destroyed my face, did wonders for my intellect. I’m a very poor copy of myself.”

“Where are we?” Donna asked. “Why are the children all the same?”

They were finally getting down to the most important part of the story, and Jenny leaned forward to take Donna’s hand. “The same pattern over and over,” she told her. “It saves an awful lot of space.”

Donna looked at the two of them, her forehead knit together. “Space?”

Miss Evangelista nodded. “Cyberspace.”

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“Doctor,” Melody said, “what were you saying a moment ago about everyone being saved?”

He shoved his hands into his trouser pockets and nodded firmly. “Right, yes. Here, let me show you.” He ran to a computer terminal, and quickly pulled up the archives from the day the Library had gone silent.

Once he had the record open, it was easy to find what he was looking for. “See, there it is, right there.” He pointed at the screen for the four people who’d gathered around him. “A hundred years ago, massive power surge. All the teleports going at once. Soon as the Vashta Nerada hit their hatching cycle, they attack. Someone hits the alarm. The computer tries to teleport everyone out.”

Melody peered at the screen. “It tried to teleport four thousand twenty-two people?”

The Doctor rocked back on his heels. “It succeeded,” he corrected. “Pulled them all out, but then what? Nowhere to send them. Nowhere safe in the whole library. Vashta Nerada growing in every shadow. Four thousand and twenty-two people all beamed up and nowhere to go.” He twirled his finger in the air. “They’re stuck in the system, waiting to be sent, like emails. So what’s a computer to do? What does a computer always do?”

Rose sucked in a breath. “It saved them,” she whispered.

The Doctor nodded, then looked for a surface he could draw on. His gaze landed on the mahogany table, and he ran to it and shoved the books out of the way as he pulled a marker out of his pocket.
“The Library,” he said, drawing a large circle right on the table. “A whole world of books, and right at the core,” he added another circle inside the smaller circle, “the biggest hard drive in history. The index to everything ever written, backup copies of every single book. The computer saved four thousand and twenty-two people the only way a computer can.” He added an arrow, pointing at the centre circle. “It saved them to the hard drive.”

Rose tapped her fingers over the centre circle. “And that’s where Jenny and Donna are?” she asked, her voice tight and not quite hopeful.

The Doctor put his hand over hers. “That’s where Jenny and Donna are,” he said, hoping as he said the words that he was right.

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Jenny linked her arm through Donna’s as Miss Evangelista led them to a bandstand where they could talk a little more easily. “How are you doing, Donna?” she asked quietly. “I know it’s a lot to take in.”

“How am I supposed to believe this?” Donna countered. “We’re not even real? This isn’t my real body? But I’ve been dieting.”

Jenny giggled. “Well, we’ve actually only been in the database for…” She squinted and tried to count back. “A little over an hour. So, you haven’t been denying yourself for as long as it feels, if it makes you feel any better.”

Donna snorted. “Just a little,” she allowed.

Miss Evangelista turned to them, and even without being able to see her face, they could sense her annoyance. They both quieted, and she nodded sharply.

“Your physical self is stored in the Library as an energy signature,” she explained. “It can be actualised again whenever you or the Library requires.”

“The Library?” In the middle of trying to grasp what she was being told, Donna suddenly remembered the faceless doll Ella had made of her. “If my face ends up on one of those statues…”

Jenny laughed. “Of course you remember the statues. Oh, you hated those.”

Miss Evangelista gestured at the park around them. “What you see around you, this entire world is nothing more than virtual reality.”

The three ladies looked around slowly, then Donna looked straight at Miss Evangelista.

“So why do you look like that?” she asked, her voice soft.

“I had no choice,” the other woman said briskly. “You both teleported. You’re perfect reproductions. I was just a data ghost caught in the wifi and automatically uploaded.”

“And that’s why you’re able to interact with the program without oversight from Doctor Moon,” Jenny said, realising the answer to a question that had bothered her from the moment she’d met the virtual Miss Evangelista.

The veiled woman nodded, but Donna asked another question before she could speak.

“And… being uploaded to the computer made you clever?”
Miss Evangelista shrugged. “We’re only strings of numbers in here. I think a decimal point may have shifted in my IQ. But my face has been the bigger advantage. I have the two qualities you require to see absolute truth. I am brilliant and unloved.”

Jenny had only been alive for three months, but she had already seen enough to know the truth in what Miss Evangelista said. Even within the world of a virtual reality, no one would pay any attention to someone who looked like Miss Evangelista. It was one of the saddest truths she’d faced yet.

Donna squinted at the two of them. “If this is all a dream, whose dream is it?”

“It’s hard to see everything in the data core, even for me, but there is a word. Just one word. Cal.”

Jenny’s mouth dropped open. “But we know what CAL is,” she said. “Sorry, Mr. Lux was telling us about her when you… ah…”

“When I died,” Miss Evangelista said calmly. “Yes, now that you mention it, I do remember hearing the start of a conversation… but I was too focused on the opening in the wall to pay attention. Continue.”

“CAL stands for Charlotte Abigail Lux. Technically, she was his aunt—his father’s younger sister. She was dying when she was just a girl, so her father—Mr. Lux’s grandfather—built the Library, with a computer at the centre. He gave her everything she wanted, all the stories in the universe.”

Miss Evangelista nodded. “Then CAL is the data core, in a way. And it is her dream we have all been folded into.”

Donna’s head was swimming. The idea that she was just… just a string of numbers was hard to swallow. But harder still was the notion that nothing of her life was real. She had everything she’d ever wanted—a perfect life with a gorgeous man who adored her and two beautiful children.

Is that really everything you ever wanted? her subconscious niggled at her. You remember the travelling now. Don’t you miss the adventure?

Ella called out to her before she could tell her subconscious what it could do with that errant thought. “Mummy, my knee!”

Donna ran to her daughter, who had fallen off a swing and skinned her knee. “Oh! Oh, look at that knee,” she said as she knelt down besides Ella. “Oh, look at that silly old knee!” She scooped Ella up into her arms and cuddled her close.

“She’s not real.”

Donna’s head snapped back so she could glare at Miss Evangelista, who had followed her across the playground.

“They’re fictions,” the woman insisted. “I’m sorry, but now that you understand that, you won’t be able to keep a hold. They are sustained only by your belief.”

Jenny put her hand on Miss Evangelista’s shoulder. “I think you’ve made your point,” she said, her voice kind, but firm. “We know this isn’t real, but until we can find a way to get out of the computer, is there any harm in pretending it is?” She took Joshua’s hand and smiled at Donna. “Let’s go home, yeah?”

Donna nodded. “Yeah.”
She wanted to be surprised when she blinked and they were back at home, but the afternoon had destroyed her ability to believe Doctor Moon’s lies.

Joshua pulled his hand away from Jenny’s and wrapped an arm around Donna’s waist. “That was quick, wasn’t it, Mummy?”

“Donna.” Jenny’s tension-filled voice forced Donna to acknowledge her, and she turned around, trying not to see the red light or hear the alarm shrieking. “Donna, something is wrong.”

Rose held the Doctor’s hand tight as she let herself really believe they would find Jenny and Donna. They knew where they were; now it was just a matter of finding a way to retrieve their data signals.

Hope had barely had time to gain a foothold when red lights started flashing in time with a blaring siren.

“What is it?” Mr. Lux asked. “What’s wrong?”

“Auto destruct enabled in twenty minutes,” a recorded voice announced.

They all ran back at the computer terminal, which was flashing two messages: one, the countdown to the auto destruct, and the other, a warning of maximum erasure.

“Maximum erasure doesn’t sound good,” Rose observed, trying to keep the fear out of her voice.

“Yeah, not so much.” All those people on the hard drive, including Jenny and Donna, would be deleted. The Doctor shoved his hand through his hair as he stumbled back from the terminal. “In twenty minutes, this planet’s going to crack like an egg.”

“No,” Mr. Lux burst out. “No, it’s all right. The Doctor Moon will stop it. It’s programmed to protect Cal.”

Rose wanted to groan, because Sod’s law dictated that as soon as Mr. Lux assured them nothing could go wrong, it would. And sure enough, a moment later, the monitor went blank.

“No, no, no, no, no, no!” the Doctor yelled. He jumped up on the table so he could look behind the terminal, and Rose saw him pull his sonic screwdriver out.

*He can do this,* Rose thought, biting hard on her lip. *The Doctor will get the computer to work again, and then he’ll save everyone.*

A different automated voice killed that thought. “All library systems are permanently offline. Sorry for any inconvenience.”

Donna sat down with her children on the couch and wrapped an arm around each of them. Jenny sat in the chair, and the sympathetic look on her face cut to the quick. “You just, you just stay where I can see you, all right?” She couldn’t stop the tears running down her face. No matter what she told her children, no matter how many precautions she took, she was going to lose them. “You, you don’t get out of my sight.”

“Is it bedtime?” Ella suggested innocently.

This time, Donna felt it happen—the computer glitch as they all moved from one room to another. At
least in the children’s bedroom with the curtain closed, they couldn’t see the red light anymore. The alarm was still there in the background, though even it was harder to hear.

Ella and Joshua were tucked snugly in their beds, and she was sitting on Ella’s bed while Jenny was on Joshua’s. The two women looked at each other, resigned, fearful expressions of their faces, then Donna took a deep breath and faked a smile.

“Okay.” Donna pulled the covers up to Ella’s chin while Jenny did the same for Joshua. “That was lovely, wasn’t it? That was a lovely bedtime. Aunt Jenny made warm milk, and we watched cartoons, and then Mummy read you a lovely bedtime story.”

Ella looked at her, through eyes that were far too knowing for a child of seven. “Mummy, Joshua and me, we’re not real, are we?”

“Of course you’re real,” Donna lied. “You’re as real as anything. Why do you say that?”

Joshua answered first. “But, Mummy, sometimes, when you’re not here, it’s like we’re not here,” he protested, and the little lisp in his voice broke Donna’s heart, almost as much as his words..

“Even when you close your eyes, we just stop,” Ella explained.

Donna had tried so hard to ignore the facts, but having them presented to her by… by the computer programs she’d thought were her children made it impossible. She blinked back tears as she looked from one to the other.

“Well, Mummy promises to never close her eyes again.” She smiled at Joshua, then turned back to kiss Ella on the forehead, but the bed was empty.

“No!” She jumped up and yanked the cover down, but the there was no little girl hiding in the sheets. She wheeled around to Joshua, but he’d disappeared too, leaving Donna standing in between two empty beds, begging the universe to give her her children back. “Please! No, please!”

She fell to her knees, pulling at the covers, trying to find her son and daughter, but they had vanished. Her desperate whispers escalated into shrieks of denial. “No! No, no! No, no!”

Jenny grabbed her arms. “Donna. Donna!” She shook her gently, and finally the other woman’s eyes focused on her. “You need to calm down!”

Donna drew back, a snarl contorting her features. “Don’t you dare tell me to calm down!” she hissed. “My children…” Her throat closed up, and she swallowed, then tried again. “My babies are gone!”

Jenny flinched. Right, not the best way to start. What would Mum say to get through to her? She nodded slowly, then tried again. “Okay, I know this is… horrifying,” she said slowly, trying to project Rose’s compassion. “I can’t imagine what it would be like to see your children disappear in front of your eyes. But maybe this is the start of us getting out of the computer. And if we get out of here, you can meet someone and have actual children of your own. Children who are real, that you share every moment of their lives.”

Donna sniffed and wiped at her eyes. “I don’t even remember being pregnant,” she admitted. “Not that I was particularly looking forward to feeling like a beached whale, but…” She sighed wistfully. “I did want some parts of it. Feeling my babies move. I never had that.”

Jenny nodded, relieved that the computer hadn’t managed to perfectly replicate every detail of life. “See, it’ll be better when you have the real experience. But for that to happen, we need to get back to
the real world. So this… as scary as it is, this might be a good thing.” She nudged Donna with her elbow. “You know Dad and Rose are out there working like mad to get us back.”

Donna opened her mouth and Jenny held her hand up. “Both of us,” she insisted. “Donna, you’re like the older sister neither of them ever had. Why do you think the computer decided you were my aunt?”

Donna stared at her for a long moment, then a tiny smile crossed her face. “Look at you; only three months old and already smarter than me,” she teased. “All right, let’s go back downstairs and wait for the world to end so we can go home.”

Mr. Lux hollered over the warnings. “We need to stop this. We’ve got to save Cal.”

Rose snorted. “And how do you propose we do that?” she countered. “As far as I can tell, Cal is the one who’s trying to kill us!”

Mr. Lux shook his head. “I think the Doctor could stop her, if we got to the main computer.”

The Doctor’s eyebrows rose. “It’s at the core of the planet.”

Melody smirked and pulled out her screwdriver. “Well, then. Let’s go.” She ran to the middle of the room and pointed it at the Library logo. The large compass rose opened and a blue stream of light flowed up. “Gravity platform,” she said simply.

“Melody Pond, I like you,” Rose declared as she stepped onto the gravity platform.

She could hear a note of relief in the archaeologist’s laugh, and a pang of sympathy went through her for the other woman. Despite the fact that Melody was older than her, currently, their relationship was very clearly one where she looked up to Rose and not the other way around. *It must have been hard, feeling like she had to earn my respect all over again.*

“Anita!” the Doctor called out, and the younger woman shuffled slowly towards them. Rose noted with some relief that she still had two shadows.

When they were all on the platform, Melody activated the command to transport them to the centre of the planet.

They had fifteen minutes left in the auto destruct countdown when they reached the data core. The Doctor ran in the direction of an orangish light, and soon he was staring in awe at a massive ball of energy. “The data core. Over four thousand living minds trapped inside it.”

“Yeah, well, they won’t be living much longer,” Melody pointed out bluntly. “We’re running out of time.”

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“If we don’t get in soon, they’re going to lose their minds,” Rose retorted. “So let’s not waste time pointing out the obvious.” She took a quick breath, then shook her head. “I’m sorry. I just want them back.”

The Doctor squeezed her shoulder, then ran past her down the corridor toward what he hoped was the main server room. He let out a sigh of relief when the multiple terminals filling the room confirmed his guess, and rushed to the nearest one.

However, he’d barely begun his attempt to get it to work when he was interrupted by the plaintive call of a young girl. “Help me. Please, help me.”
“What’s that?” Anita asked as they scanned the room for the source of the voice.

The Doctor looked at Mr. Lux, who had tears in his eyes. “That’s Cal,” the other man confirmed. He tugged off his gloves and reached for a lever in the wall. When he pulled it, a door opened on the opposite side of the room.

The group ran into a room filled with more computer processors and terminals, and the Doctor watched in astonishment as a Courtesy Node turned around to reveal the face of the same little girl they’d seen on the monitor upstairs.

“Please help me. Please help me.”

“It’s the little girl,” Anita said, apparently able to see well enough through her visor to pick out the girl’s features. “The girl we saw in the computer.”

“This is Cal,” Mr. Lux said quietly. “I told you my grandfather put her living mind inside the computer… Well, in a way, she is the computer. The main command node.”

“Help me. Please help me,” the girl continued to beg.

The Doctor stared at the command node, the pieces falling into place. “So Cal is in the computer, dreaming of the perfect life. But she’s also part of the Library, so when the shadows came and the alarm sounded…”

“The shadows,” CAL said, “I have to… I have to save. Have to save.”

“And she saved them.” The Doctor peered up toward the planet’s surface. They were even closer to the data core here than they had been before. “She saved everyone in the Library. Folded them into her dreams and kept them safe.”

“Then why didn’t she tell us?” Anita asked.

*Doctor.* Rose’s sharp nudge got his attention immediately. *Anita only has one shadow.*

The Doctor looked over at her and his hearts dropped. *Oh, Anita.*

The computer countdown reminded him that he had still-living people who were counting on him, which meant he didn’t have time to confront the swarm that had just killed Anita.

“Because she’s forgotten,” he said, in answer to the question. “She’s got over four thousand living minds chatting away inside her head. Imagine trying to keep track of that many individual thoughts at once. Even a computer can’t usually handle four thousand twenty-two processes at one time. We’ll be lucky if her memory of the truth is the only thing missing.”

“So what do we do?” Melody asked matter-of-factly.

There were only ten minutes left on the countdown, and that wasn’t enough time to think of a clever plan. “Easy!” He ran back to the terminal and opened a command line. “We beam all the people out of the data core. The computer will reset and stop the countdown.” The information he was getting from the computer wasn’t promising. “Difficult. Charlotte doesn’t have enough memory space left to make the transfer.”

“Easy,” Rose drawled. “Someone runs back upstairs, gets the TARDIS, and we use her memory space.”
Melody snorted. “Difficult. The Library is swarming with Vashta Nerada.”

The Doctor looked at Mr. Lux and Other Dave. “You two, go back to the surface. If I succeed, you’ll soon have four thousand people who need to be sent home.”

The two men looked at each other, then shrugged and turned around. Melody started to protest, but the Doctor put his finger to his lips and pointed to Anita. Melody’s shoulders slumped when she saw that her protege only had one shadow.

The Doctor’s hearts ached for the young woman who had lost three friends in a single day. “Melody, do you know anything about splicing two computers together, the way we’re talking about?” he asked, both because he needed her help and because he hoped it would distract her from her grief.

She pulled her gloves off and nodded. “Oh, yes,” she promised, sounding exactly like… well, him. “You taught me yourself. Said it would come in handy someday—I guess someday is today.” She looked at him pointedly. “But none of my fancy computer and electronic skills will matter if you don’t get the TARDIS here in time.”

The Doctor nodded and turned to Anita, who had crept closer to them while they’d talked. “What about the Vashta Nerada?” she asked.

“Rose, come here, love.” The shadows had been lengthening in her direction, and he wanted her outside their reach. When she was close enough to take his hand, he looked back at Anita. “These are their forests. We’re going to seal Charlotte inside her little world, take everybody else away. The shadows can swarm to their hearts’ content.”

“So you think they’re just going to let us go?” the Vashta Nerada asked, condescension dripping from their voice.

The Doctor swallowed the angry retort he wanted to give and set his jaw. “Best offer they’re going to get.”

Anita’s helmet tilted slightly. “You’re going to make ‘em an offer?”

In his peripheral vision, the Doctor watched Melody’s tall, willowy form move from one panel to another, using the computer terminals to bring up CAL’s memories while he and Rose handled the Vashta Nerada. He recognised every move she made and briefly congratulated his future self on training her well, before focusing on the Vashta Nerada again.

“They’d better take it, because right now, I’m finding it very hard to make any kind of offer at all.” Rose rubbed her thumb over his, and he took a deep breath before his temper got out of control. “You know what? I really liked Anita. She was brave, even when she was crying. And she never gave in. And you ate her.” The Doctor pointed the screwdriver at the visor of her helmet, and only a skull was visible. “But I’m going to let that pass, just as long as you let them pass.”

The voice deepened, gaining an dangerous edge Anita had never used. “How long have you known?”

He walked away from Rose to look Anita’s skull in the face. “I counted the shadows. You only have one now.” Anita’s neural relay flashed. “She’s nearly gone. Be kind.”

“These are our forests,” they said coldly. “We are not kind.”

The Doctor crossed his arms over his chest. “I’m giving you back your forests, but you are giving me them. You are letting them go.” He turned his back on the swarm to walk to the gravity platform,
painfully aware that the clock was ticking.

“These are our forests. They are our meat.”

The threat was obvious, but before the Doctor could even blink, he felt a flare of something stronger than anger over the bond. He checked Rose’s eyes as she stepped forward and thought he saw tiny flecks of gold dancing in her eyes, along with a determined glint that was all Rose. Not fully Bad Wolf, he thought, but something similar.

At the same time, the bond vibrated with her fury. He forced himself to watch quietly as she confronted the Vashta Nerada.

She held up her hand. “You’ve come far enough,” she ordered.

The Doctor turned back around and narrowed his eyes when he realised the swarm had one arm lifted and had slowly been extending itself toward him.

Power buzzed as the edge of Rose’s awareness as she stared down the swarm, but it stayed leashed for now. The TARDIS hummed in the back of her mind, and she smiled, knowing the ship was there if she needed any help.

Rather than stop, the swarm shifted direction slightly, moving toward her instead. Rose smirked and shook her head as she watched its progress. “If you’re smart, you’ll take the Doctor’s offer,” she said, her voice deathly calm. “You really shouldn’t have threatened my Doctor, but since he’s promised to let you go, I won’t harm you—as long as you don’t harm him.”

The swarm scoffed at the warning. “You are mortal, as is he.” The shadows moved another six inches closer to both her and the Doctor. “There is nothing you could do to stop us.”

The TARDIS sang in the back of Rose’s mind, and she knew exactly what to say to get the Vashta Nerada to leave them alone. A surge of confidence shot through her as she tossed her hair back over her shoulder and stared down the swarm.

“I’m the Bad Wolf. Do you really want to test what I can do to protect the Doctor?”

The song in her mind swelled, and to her surprise, the wind picked up around them. A moment later, the familiar grinding noise of the TARDIS engines echoed in the room. She heard the Doctor’s sharp intake of breath when he realised what was happening, but she didn’t dare look away from the Vashta Nerada.

The shadows paused when the TARDIS materialised only a metre to Rose’s right. The air in the room was tense as Rose, the Doctor, and Melody waited for the Vashta Nerada to consider their chances in light of that show of power.

Finally, the shadows receded. “You have one day,” they said before disappearing and letting the suit collapse.

The Doctor stared at Rose. “You… How did…” He ran his hand through his hair and chuckled hoarsely.

Rose shook her head. “I can’t take credit for the TARDIS. She did that all on her own. As for the rest…” She stepped closer to him and pressed her hand to his jaw. “I want you safe, my Doctor,” she said simply.

“Rose Tyler, Bad Wolf and protector of the Doctor.”
Melody cleared her throat. “As… um, touching and slightly terrifying as this is, we are running on a clock here. Maybe the two of you could get the TARDIS ready while I finish this up? Please?”

Rose smiled when the Doctor unlocked the door. “We’ll just go into the Vortex to give us time to get things ready. We’ll be back before you even notice we’re gone!” she called back over her shoulder.

While the Doctor moved to the controls to take them into the Vortex, Rose rested her hands on a coral strut. Thank you, she told the ship. The only response she got was a warm chuckle that made her feel like there was some detail she was missing, but Rose shrugged it off and turned back to the Doctor.

His attention was completely focused on the controls, and as they left the Library and reentered the Vortex, some of Rose’s exhilaration faded. “Are you…”

He let out a deep breath and looked up at her. “No. Not upset.” She opened her mouth, but he shook his head. “We don’t have time to talk about it right now. I’ll…” He ran his hand through his hair. “I’ll explain later.”

Rose shrugged and focused on the TARDIS. “Are you ready to save four thousand and twenty-two people, old girl?” she murmured while the Doctor ducked down below the console and pulled up a section of the grating. “We can’t do it without you.”

The TARDIS hummed encouragingly, and Rose leaned back on the jump seat to watch the Doctor work. There was still some kind of energy buzzing over their bond, and she tried to puzzle it out.

“You were terrifying and sexy as hell,” he said bluntly as he dug around in the storage compartment until he found the cables he needed and hooked them up to the console, ready to be wired into the Library’s mainframe. “The way you took charge and stared down the Vashta Nerada… I’m still trying to figure out how I can be absolutely petrified and completely turned on at the same time.”

Rose finally recognised the desire burning hot over the bond. It was so entwined with his fear that the sensations had merged to feel like something new and different—something she hadn’t been able to name until he’d explained it.

It was a heady combination.

But for now, she wanted to ease his fear. She was fine—she knew that instinctively. Rose watched him work, saw how hard he was focusing on what he was doing, and she knew how to shake him out of his fear.

She hopped out of the jump seat and leaned on a smooth section of the console only a few inches away from where he was working. The Doctor’s hands stilled and she reached over to touch his arm.

“Well…” she said, keeping her voice low and breathy. “If you’re debating which one to act on…” She trailed her fingers down his arm.

The Doctor jumped. “Rose!” His voice was a squeak. “We’re in the middle of saving four thousand people.”

To his surprise, Rose didn’t push her point, or remind him that time was meaningless in the Vortex. Instead, he thought he caught a glimpse of a satisfied smirk on her face as she turned away from him.

It only took him a moment to realise how artfully she’d managed to redirect his thoughts. Surprise over her actions had cleared his mind of his confusing reactions to her display with the Vashta Nerada.
He shook his head, then double-checked the work he’d done, now that he wasn’t fighting the urge to drag her to the medbay and run a whole slew of scans on her. After tweaking one wire, he spun around to the navigation panel and started setting the coordinates so they would land only a few seconds after they’d left.

That reminded him of the other mystery of the day—how had the TARDIS appeared, exactly when they’d needed her?

As he turned a dial, he felt the familiar hum of Rose and the TARDIS talking. He looked at Rose through the time rotor. She had her hand resting on the helmic regulator, just waiting for his signal. And as she waited, she was talking to the TARDIS, communicating with her on a level the Doctor could never achieve.

_Oh, of course._ The TARDIS had come to them today the same way she had when they’d needed to escape the Racnoss. She’d latched onto active huon particles and pulled herself to them.

“You’re being awfully careful with the coordinates,” Rose observed, breaking into his private thoughts.

“I want to make sure we land only seconds after we left Melody,” he explained as he tweaked a control.

“She’ll get us there,” she promised. “She wants Jenny and Donna back just as much as we do.”

The Doctor narrowed his eyes as he finished setting the coordinates, then stepped back and nodded at Rose. He could feel the connection between her and the TARDIS singing at the edges of his mind as she worked to send them back into flight. It felt… different, somehow. Stronger, maybe? Closer, like the TARDIS was just waiting for Rose to reach out to her.

They landed hard, and the Doctor shook his head, more than willing to set that thought aside. The traces of Bad Wolf lingering in Rose always made him uneasy. He’d been told, once upon a time, that the Bad Wolf could not be uncreated. It was a fact he tried to ignore.

“You’re driving is getting better, Doctor,” Melody said when he stepped out of the TARDIS. She was still standing at the same panel she’d been working on when they’d left. “Or I suppose maybe it’s gotten worse as you’ve aged. You weren’t even gone for a full minute.”

The Doctor rolled his eyes and carried a cable over to her, while Rose dragged the power cord with her. “You know, those times when our landings are really atrociously bad are actually the exception, not the rule,” he pointed out.

Melody tossed her hair back over her shoulder. “Yeah…” she drawled. “But they’re so memorable.” She took the computer cable and began hooking it up to her panel. “How long did it take you?”

“About ten minutes.” The Doctor pointed at two panels. “Rose, can you get those open while I work with Melody on the memory boards?”

“What do I do after they’re open?” she asked as she used her sonic screwdriver to undo the bolts and slide the first panel out.

“There should be five rows of switches on each panel. Make sure that all the blue switches are toggled on, and the green ones are toggled off.”

Melody was shaking her head as the Doctor took the control panel next to her. “What?” he asked as he started rewiring the mainframe so it could handle the amount of electricity that would surge
through it when they activated the upload.

“Nothing.” She looked up at him, a funny smile on your face. “It’s just… I know you’re not the Doctor and Rose I know, but listening to you talk… it’s like nothing has changed. The Doctor and Rose Tyler, always perfect partners.”

The Doctor looked up and met Rose’s gaze with a half smile. To his surprise, Melody groaned loudly. “If either of you say the word, ‘Forever,’ I swear I’m going to be sick,” she threatened.

Rose laughed while the Doctor sputtered, trying to find some sort of comeback to that. “Come on, you two,” she said as she flipped the last row of switches as the Doctor had instructed. “I’m ready over here.”

Melody and the Doctor exchanged a sheepish smile, and the Doctor pulled the connection from the TARDIS over to the Library’s motherboard. “Melody Pond,” the Doctor mused as he watched her expertly splice the cable in. “You are very good at that.”

Her eyes widened, and she smiled up at him. “Thank you, Doctor.” She bit her lip and bent over her work. “I’m getting everything finished except the last connection. I’ll do that at the end of the countdown,” she explained. “There’ll be a blip in the command flow. That way it should improve our chances of a clean download.”

She spliced one more set of wires together as the computer warned them they only had two minutes left until the autodestruct. An awkward silence fell over the room after she stepped back; there were so many questions the Doctor wanted to ask, but if he’d taught Melody Pond how to connect two computer mainframes, there was no way he hadn’t taught her how to maintain timelines.

To his surprise, she was the one who broke the silence. “Why didn’t you and Rose warn me that our first meeting was out of order like this?” she asked quietly.

The Doctor sighed and raked his hand through his hair. “Because you didn’t know when we met you. We prepared you for it, though. Teaching you about avoiding spoilers and giving you the code words so we would trust you.”

Melody looked up at him. “But why not just tell me not to come to the Library?”

“Causality loop,” he explained. “Because we met you here, it’ll be impossible to avoid things that might set you on your path to becoming an archaeologist—even little things, like giving you your own sonic screwdriver. And because of your position, you were chosen to lead this expedition, and suspecting danger, you naturally asked us to join you, which ensured we would meet you here.”

“Basically, you met me here, so you had to make sure you would meet me here.”

The Doctor smiled at her succinct summary of his rambling explanation. “Basically.”

Melody wrinkled her nose. “Yeah… I’ve never really fancied the way time travel works,” she muttered.

The Doctor frowned at her; there was something different about her voice… “You’re Scottish!” he realised, pinning down the trace of an accent that had slipped through.

“Autodesctruct in one minute.”

Melody shifted her gaze away from him. “No, but my mum is. I guess I have a bit of an accent when I’m tired or upset.”
The Doctor narrowed his eyes. He could see the faint lines around her mouth; she hadn’t wanted him to learn that piece of her past. *Why would it matter if we know Melody’s mum is Scottish?* He puzzled over that for a minute, then shrugged and let it go.

The computer started the final countdown and Melody took the two cables in hand. “My gloves should protect me from the sparks,” she told the Doctor.

“Well, the TARDIS infirmary can take care of you if they don’t,” Rose said as she took the Doctor’s hand.

Melody shook her head and laughed at them, then she connected the two cables in a flurry of sparks. The digital timer ticking down the seconds to the autodestruct froze on 00:01, and all three of them let out a breath of relief.

The TARDIS hummed loudly, making Rose and the Doctor both laugh. “I think she wants to take us all upstairs with everyone else.” Rose held the door open. “I won’t expect the bigger on the inside comment from you this time, Melody, but please tell me you said it the first time you walked inside.”

Melody winked at them as she ran her fingers over a strut. “Spoilers.”

Chapter End Notes

When I was writing *But Being Spent* over two years ago, I realised that there’s really no good reason the Doctor couldn’t use the TARDIS to boost the computer power... except that the whole point of this story was to set River up as the Doctor’s tragically lost future love. And if I didn’t need her to be the person in his life that he already knew he lost, then I could feel free to save her life and let her go on living. So, here we have it—the great tragedy of the Library has been rewritten.
Donna couldn’t bear to stay in the children’s room any longer. “Come on,” she told Jenny, turning her back on the two empty beds and stepping into the hallway.

The alarm, which had been muffled in the small bedroom, was suddenly piercing her skull, giving her a headache. She pressed her lips into a thin line and put her hand to her temple, hoping to stave off the impending migraine.

A moment later, she heard the door close behind her, and then Jenny linked her arm through hers. Donna gave her a smile, weak though it was.

“If the world’s going to end today, I think we deserve something stronger than a cuppa. I’ve got a nice bottle of wine in the kitchen; what do you say?”

“That sounds perfect,” Jenny said sincerely.

But they were walking down the stairs when the red light and alarm stopped. At the same time, the hint of realism this world had had disappeared.

“I feel like we’re about to wake up,” Jenny said, and Donna nodded.

The door flew open, and Lee stepped inside. “Donna? What’s happening?”

Donna ran down the rest of the stairs and grabbed him by the shoulders as a bright light flooded the room. “I don’t know, but it’s not real. Nothing here’s real. The whole world, everything. None of it’s real.”

Lee’s hands cupped her elbows. “Am I real?”

The knots in Donna’s stomach tightened as Lee’s face started to disappear in the light. “Of course you’re real.” He had to be. Miss Evangelista only said the children were imaginary—not Lee! “I know you’re real.” She ran her hands up and down his arms, trying to memorise the way he felt. “Oh God, oh God, I hope you’re real.”

Something pulled her away from Lee, and she watched his lips move as he tried to say her name. His stammer had gotten better, but it still returned when he was upset.

“I’ll find you,” she called out as the light consumed him. “I promise you, I’ll find you.”

The short hop in the TARDIS from the core of the planet to the heart of the Library only took a moment. As soon as the time rotor stopped, the Doctor jogged down the ramp, opened the door, and
stuck his head out.

“Ah, brilliant,” he said when he realised they’d landed exactly where he’d wanted, on the same balcony near the biographies that they’d stood on only hours before. Rose and Melody joined him a moment later, and Rose closed the door behind them.

The sound of over four thousand voices trying to figure out what happened to them drifted down to them. No one seemed to have noticed their arrival, save one. Heavy footsteps thudded down the stairs, and Mr. Lux was soon hugging each of them in turn. “You did it!” he said, wonder in his voice. “You actually did it!”

The Doctor broke away. “We need to find Jenny and Donna,” he said, scanning the room.

“Yes, of course.” Mr. Lux started back up the steps, looking back over his shoulder. “We’ll get the teleports online shortly and start sending people home.”

“Yes, all right. That sounds excellent,” the Doctor said, trying to keep the impatience out of his voice. Rose didn’t say anything, so he thought maybe he did a better job this time than usual... or maybe she was as impatient as he was.

He looked at Rose and Melody and bounced on his toes. “Right. Let’s split up and find Jenny and Donna, then meet back here.”

Melody shook her head. “I’m afraid this is where we say goodbye, Doctor. I need to find Other Dave and see if we can get back to our rocket, or if we should let them teleport us home. And you need to get back to your own timeline and not be part of mine—at least, not yet.”

Rose put a hand on the other woman’s arm, and Melody welcomed the hug she offered. “Thank you,” Rose said a moment later, after she’d stepped back. “I hope meeting you next time is a little less eventful.”

Melody pressed her lips together, but her dancing eyes told them she was trying to hold back laughter. “Oh, if only you knew!” she gasped finally. She jogged up the first few steps, then waved at them, before climbing the rest of the way and turning down a corridor.

“Who do you think she was?” Rose asked as she and the Doctor climbed the stairs. “She’s not our daughter, right?”

The Doctor shook his head. “No, we’d feel her in our heads, just like Jenny.” He scanned the crowded reading room. “Speaking of Jenny...”

“Your idea of splitting up was good,” Rose told him. “I’ll take the left side of the room, you take the right side of the room.”

The Doctor leaned down and brushed a kiss over her cheek. “Let me know if you find them.” Rose smiled, then walked away.

Jenny blinked as she felt the same whooshing sensation of a teleport that she’d felt earlier, and when she opened her eyes, she was looking at the Library again. It wasn’t silent anymore, though—four thousand voiced buzzed around her as all the people who’d been saved tried to figure out where they were.

A moment later, Donna grabbed her and hugged her tight. “Never thought I’d be glad to see this
creepy place again,” she muttered.

Jenny laughed, but the words reminded her how she’d gotten into the Library computer in the first place. She cast a glance around the room, noting that it was well-lit and filled with people not being eaten by the shadows.

She breathed a sigh of relief, then laughed again. Of course her mum and dad wouldn’t have pulled everyone out of the computer if it wasn’t safe.

Donna let go of her just as suddenly as she reached for her. Her eyes were wide as her gaze darted around the room, and Jenny wasn’t surprised when she said, “We need to find Lee. He’s here, somewhere…”

As crowded as the room was, Jenny doubted how successful they’d be. She didn’t doubt Lee was in the room somewhere, but finding him…

However, the crease in Donna’s forehead and the tight lines around her mouth convinced her to keep her concerns to herself. Instead, she nodded.

“All right. I’ll look on this side of the room,” she said, pointing to her left. Donna nodded, then spun around and dove into the crowd in the opposite direction.

I hope Lee was real, Jenny thought as she watched her friend disappear. After losing her two children, she wasn’t sure how Donna would react if she couldn’t find Lee.

There was a niggling of doubt in her mind as to the wisdom of the task. Donna and Lee didn’t actually know one another, after all. Or did they? Had the computer automatically given them all the pertinent facts about each other’s lives?

She pressed her lips into a thin line and kept looking. Donna could decide later if the real Lee was a man she could fall in love with. But she’d only get that choice if they could find him.

“Jenny!”

A breath caught in Jenny’s throat, and she spun around towards the voice. “Mum!” she cried out, the title slipping out without conscious thought.

Rose didn’t seem to mind, though. She swept Jenny up in a hug as soon as she reached her, squeezing her tight. “Oh, God, Jenny, we were so scared when we realised you and Donna never made it to the TARDIS,” Rose murmured in her ear. “Your dad felt awful, since he was the one who convinced you both to go.”

Jenny rolled her eyes and stepped back. “It’s not his fault. It just… happened.”

There was a wry smile on Rose’s face. “I know that and you know that, but you know your father.” She took Jenny’s hand. “Come on—he’s over here, looking for Donna.”

Looking for. The words reminded Jenny of her promise to Donna, and she pulled her hand back. When her mum frowned at her, she licked her lips and hoped the explanation didn’t sound as crazy as it felt.

“There was someone we met in the computer,” she said. “Someone Donna really cared for. I was looking for him when you found me.”

Rose nodded and took her hand again. Jenny found she didn’t mind the secure feeling of being
connected to her mother, after wondering if she’d ever see her again.

“All right, what does Donna’s bloke look like?” Rose asked as they both scanned the crowd.

“He’s tall,” Jenny started. “Like, about as tall as Dad. But not as skinny.”

Rose snorted. “Of course not. Donna insists that the Doctor is too skinny—tall and skinny is definitely not her type. Hair colour?”

“Dark. His name is Lee, and he has a stammer.”

They worked their way through the crowd towards the teleport. If nothing else, Lee would have to leave through there.

“J-J-”

Jenny recognised the stammer and followed the sound with her eyes. “Lee!” He was on the teleport pad already, and dread settled in Jenny’s stomach when he disappeared before their eyes.

“Oh, Donna’s going to be gutted,” she muttered, running her hand over her ponytail and tugging on the end lightly.

Rose linked her arm through Jenny’s elbow, and they started walking towards the TARDIS.

“Luckily, since everyone in the Library was uploaded through the TARDIS’ computer, we have all their information. You and Donna can go through the files, and when you find him, we’ll have the TARDIS search for him.”

After Rose went off in her direction, the Doctor moved slowly through the crowd, scanning for a flash of blonde or red hair. The day was almost over, but he wouldn’t be able to relax until every member of their little family was back in the TARDIS where they belonged.

“Excuse me.”

The Doctor turned towards the familiar voice and picked up his pace, moving through the crowd a little more aggressively.

“I’m looking for a man, his name was Lee McAvoy.”

The Doctor saw Donna finally, standing in front of a harried looking librarian who was hunched over a terminal. “He was about this tall.” She held up her hand.

I found Donna, he told Rose.

The librarian tapped at the keyboard, then shook his head. “I’m sorry, I have no record of a Lee McAvoy being in the Library that day.”

Donna opened her mouth to argue, but snapped it shut when the Doctor put his hand on her elbow and gently pulled her out of line. “Thank you,” he said to the librarian. “We’ll keep looking.”

“Doctor!” Donna flung her arms around his neck, and the Doctor chuckled and pulled her in for a tight hug. “You have no idea how glad I am to see you.”

“Oh, I think I do,” the Doctor mumbled.
I’ve got Jenny, but we just watched Donna’s bloke teleport away.

The Doctor was relieved that she’d found their daughter, but the second half of the news made him cringe. He pulled back from Donna’s embrace and took her hand.

“Come on. TARDIS is this way.”

Donna dug in her heels. “I have to look for—”

“Lee, yes I know.” The Doctor stopped and tilted his head as the name struck him. “Funny, that’s the name I gave the princess when I had to make up a fiancé for you. But…” He tugged on his tie. “Rose and Jenny just watched him teleport away.”

Donna slumped. “Oh. Yeah, of course. I mean… why would he be looking for me?”

The Doctor frowned at the defeat in her voice. “Hey, none of that. There are over four thousand people in this room—maybe he looked but couldn’t find you.” He sighed when Donna just shrugged. “Anyway, this isn’t the end. The TARDIS uploaded every single living soul that was trapped in the computer. That means she has all their information, and she can help you find him.”

Donna pursed her lips. “It’s worth it, you think?”

They finally started walking, working their way slowly through the crowd of people. “Worth it?” The Doctor scoffed. “Is true love worth it, Donna Noble?”

“Dunno. It hasn’t worked out so well for me so far.”

The Doctor shook his head. “Not every bloke will disappear or try to feed you to a giant spider.”

Donna pulled her hand free of his, and when he looked back at her, she had her hands on her hips. The Doctor pointed his thumb over his shoulder.

“We’re almost there,” he said, hoping to stop her rant.

She rolled her eyes, but followed him through the gallery to the stairs. “You know, Doctor, if you ever get tired of the life of flying around the galaxy, saving planets…”

“Yes, Donna?” he asked as they turned the last corner.

“Don’t go on the lecture circuit as a motivational speaker.”

The Doctor’s reply was forgotten when they reached the stairs, and he spotted two blonde women waiting for them by the TARDIS. “Jenny!” She spun around and ran towards him as he took the stairs two at a time. Her slight body ran into him on the third stair, and he picked her up and swung her gently from side to side as they hugged.

“I was afraid we’d lost you,” he whispered in her ear.

Her arms tightened around his neck. “Can’t get rid of me that easily, Dad,” she mumbled into his shoulder.

The Doctor chuckled and lowered her to her feet. “I’m looking forward to hearing all about your adventures in the Library computer,” he told her and Donna as they all walked to the TARDIS.

Jenny tucked her arm through his and rested her head on his shoulder. “Mum’s already made me promise to tell you everything,” she said.
Mum? He raised an eyebrow at Rose, and a warm glow of contentment spread through his chest when she smiled and nodded. He opened the door and watched his family enter their home: Donna, the friend who was the older sister he’d never had; Rose; his bond mate and other half; and Jenny, their daughter.

Melody sighed when she stepped into her own flat, just off the grounds of Andromeda University. Her cat Bastet meowed and slunk out of the shadows to wind around her ankles in greeting. Melody picked up the petite grey and white Siamese and scratched her under the chin before letting her climb up to her favourite perch on top of her shoulder.

“That was one hell of an expedition,” she told Bastet as she wandered into the kitchen. The light over the range was still on, so she didn’t bother with the overhead light while she filled the kettle and fixed dinner.

The doorbell rang, and she groaned. Only one person would visit at this time of night.

“It’s open, Aunt Donna,” she called out as she served her dinner.

“It’s not Donna.”

The familiar voice nearly pushed Melody into tears. She spun around, forcing her cat to leap for the floor with an annoyed growl. But then she was wrapped in the solid embrace of her godfather’s hug, and she didn’t care if she’d irritated her pet. She might be a grown woman of thirty, but after a day like today, a day when she’d lost three friends, she wasn’t too proud to accept comfort from someone who knew her best.

The Doctor stroked her hair and pressed a kiss to her forehead. “You were brilliant today, Melody,” he told her quietly. “None of us would have made it out of the Library without you. I know it hurts to lose people—and you have no idea how much I wish you hadn’t learned that today—but you saved four thousand twenty-nine people.”

Melody heard Rose moving around in the kitchen, pouring out the tea she’d made to make a proper cuppa, like Jackie had taught her. That knowledge was just as comforting as the Doctor’s words, and she finally relaxed enough to let go of him and sit down at the kitchen table.

Bastet jumped up to the perch reserved for her, and Melody absently petted her. “Who are the other seven?” she asked.

“Mr. Lux, Other Dave, Jenny, your Aunt Donna, Rose, myself… and you, Melody. You saved your own life today.”

Melody straightened up. “I did, didn’t I?”

The Doctor grinned at her. “Yes, you did, and lest I repeat myself, you were rather brilliant at it.”

Bastet purred loudly, and the Doctor’s nostrils thinned as he looked at her. “I see you still have the Beast,” he said, purposely mangling the cat’s name, as always.

Feline eyes narrowed to slits as the old antagonists glared at each other across the table. The familiarity was just as comforting to Melody as the hug and chat had been, and she settled in to watch their face-off.

The staring contest didn’t end until Rose entered the room with a pot of tea. “Leave Beastie alone,”
she told the Doctor, petting the cat quickly before returning to the kitchen to pick up the dinner she’d already served up.

“Brilliant, eggs and soldiers,” Melody said when Rose set a plate down in front of her.

Rose squeezed her shoulder before taking her place at the table. “It was always your favourite, just like mine.”

They settled in for their dinner of comfort food, and by the time the meal was over, Melody felt almost better. “And… I didn’t muck up the timelines too much? I know I gave you some future information.”

“Not that much,” Rose countered. “And the Doctor kept his promise and let Mum get him drunk at Christmas last year, even though he could taste the ginger.”

The Doctor pouted, and both women giggled. “I’m just glad we have that hangover cure,” he groused. “I would not have been happy if I’d had to go through the whole of Boxing Day with someone trying to pound a drum through my skull.”

When the laughter died down, Melody looked at Rose’s red hair and slightly taller figure. “It was hard not giving that away though.”

“Now you know why we always leave pictures around of ourselves from back then.” Rose tugged on a strand of her hair. “I did notice you seemed a little surprised by my appearance, but I just figured I’d aged, and you’d never seen me that young looking.”

They all smirked, then the Doctor said, “For someone who claims to hate time travel, you acted like a veteran today.”

“I’m an archaeologist, Doctor.” Melody rolled her eyes.

“Exactly!” He pointed at her. “Why wouldn’t you want to travel back in time and see the people you’re studying?”

She pinched the bridge of her nose. It was an old debate, going back to her teens, when she’d discovered the thrill of studying a culture before visiting the planet in the TARDIS. “Because, if I go back and see it, I don’t need to solve the puzzle,” she told him for the thousandth time. “Time travel is cheating.”

Rose rolled her eyes and stood up to clear the table. “Melody Pond, you were born in the twenty-first century on Earth and attended Luna University in the fifty-first century. It’s a bit hypocritical to claim time travel is cheating.”

Melody pouted for a moment after Rose left the room. Rose usually sided with her in this debate. She’s right, though, she acknowledged when Rose came back.

A question occurred to her, and she raised her eyebrow. “Speaking of time travel, how did you know it was today?” She waved her hand. “Not today as in the date—you knew that because I gave you the coordinates on the psychic paper. But this is you linearly in my life—how did you know that this point in our timeline was the right point to come to this day?”

The Doctor and Rose exchanged a glance, then Rose said, “Amy called us right after you left. She said you were going on some expedition to a planet that had been quarantined for 100 years, and didn’t that sound dangerous?”
Melody rolled her eyes. “Of course she did. I’ve been living on my own for nearly ten years, and she still sends my godparents to check up on me if she thinks I’m in trouble.”

The Doctor chuckled. “And Jackie still checks in on Rose, even though she hasn’t lived at home since before you were born. It’s just the way parents are,” he said practically. “In fact, right now the younger version of ourselves are curled up on the couch in the TARDIS having a movie marathon with Jenny and Donna because today was the closest we’ve come so far to losing her.”

“Speaking of,” Rose said, “we ought to go so you can ring your parents. I think Rory was just as worried, but he tried to keep it under wraps.”

Melody nodded and walked them to the door. She heard the TARDIS leave as she grabbed her mobile and went into the living room to curl up on the sofa. Her cat jumped up into her lap while she waited for someone at home to pick up, and she accepted the cuddly comfort.

“Hi, Mum. It’s me.”

There was no need for any discussion. As soon as they left the Library, the Doctor sent the TARDIS to the galaxy’s best pizzeria on Estaran 7, where everyone ordered their favourite toppings. He and Jenny carried the pizzas straight to the media room while Rose and Donna stopped in the kitchen for plates and beer. If there was ever a night to veg out in front of the telly, it was tonight.

They all enjoyed The Princess Bride—even Jenny could quote the famous lines now, thanks to the flawless memory of a Time Lord. Donna started nodding off towards the end of the animated Beauty and the Beast, and roused enough when the movie was over to shuffle off to bed.

“What about you, Jenny?” the Doctor asked as they cleaned up the leftover pizza. “Ready for bed, or do you want one more film?”

“Can we watch one more?” She tugged on the hem of her t-shirt. “Just the three of us?”

The Doctor’s chest tightened at her soft, vulnerable tone. “Of course we can.”

Ten minutes later, he was back on the couch sitting in between Rose and Jenny as the opening credits to Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone scrolled across the screen. Rose was curled into his side with her hand resting on his thigh, while Jenny was sitting with a few inches between them. However, as the movie went on, her head drooped and eventually rested on his shoulder. The Doctor looked over at her shortly after Harry, Ron, and Hermione were all Sorted into Gryffindor, and realised she was sound asleep.

“Jenny?” he whispered, but she only snuffled softly and burrowed her face into his shoulder.

The Doctor chuckled and sent the TARDIS a silent request to pause the movie. Then he shook Jenny gently by the shoulder.

“What?” she mumbled.

“Time to go to bed, sweetheart,” he said softly.

She lifted her head from his shoulder and blinked at him a few times. “M’kay,” she agreed, her voice heavy with sleep. She started to stand up, then stopped when she was sitting on the edge of the couch. “You’ll still be here when I wake up, yeah?”
The Doctor ached to pull her into a hug, but sitting side by side on the couch wasn’t the best spot for it. He stood up and pulled her to her feet, then wrapped his arms tight around her.

“We’ll still be here,” he promised. “And if you wake up in the middle of the night, you’ll know you’re home for real because you’ll be able to feel the TARDIS.”

The ship flickered the lights slightly, and Jenny looked up at the ceiling. “Thanks, old girl,” she whispered.

The Doctor pressed a kiss to her forehead. “Sleep well, and sweet dreams.”

A huge yawn cracked her jaw, and she stumbled backwards toward the door. “Yeah. I’ll”—She yawned again—“I’ll see you for breakfast.”

After Jenny shuffled out of the room, Rose sighed and looked up at the Doctor. “I vote we ignore any other messages on the psychic paper,” she said, feeling a bone-deep weariness. “Whose idea was it to answer a stranger’s summons, anyway?”

The corners of the Doctor’s mouth turned up. “Oh, a very smart, compassionate woman who said we couldn’t abandon someone counting on our help.”

“Hmph,” Rose grunted.

The Doctor chuckled and sat back down beside her. They were both tired, but he knew without asking that Rose wasn’t ready to move just yet.

Rose shifted closer to the Doctor when he draped his arm over her shoulders. The inescapable domesticity of the evening reminded her of movie nights with her mum, and that reminded her of Melody’s slip about future holidays.

“Penny for them,” the Doctor said quietly.

She sighed. “I can’t stop thinking about what Melody said.”

“About spending Christmases with your mum and Pete,” he stated.

“Yeah.” Rose bit her lip. She hadn’t even really considered Pete and the baby, but Melody had clearly said, “the Tylers.” Not just Jackie’s. “I know… you said before that it was impossible. Travel between the worlds was closed off.”

The Doctor turned slightly so he could meet her questioning gaze. “And if you remember, just a few months ago when you asked again, I admitted that enough impossible things seemed to be happening for it to suddenly be a possibility.”

Rose nodded, but her mind was already moving on to other hints they’d gotten in the last few months. “That Lucius bloke in Pompeii told you that he is returning,” she said, going slowly as she considered her words. “Do you think… maybe he was talking about Mickey?”

A shiver ran down her back as she said it, and she knew she was right. More than that, she knew that Mickey’s return was important, somehow.

She puzzled over that for a moment. If her family was coming back from Pete’s World, it wasn’t a huge leap to wonder if Mickey would, too. So why did it feel like such an important turning point?

A bend in their timeline kept the future stubbornly out of sight, no matter how hard Rose tried to see
it. She huffed in exasperation, and the Doctor rested his hand on her knee.

“I see it too. Something’s coming,” he said, his voice carrying the same hint of foreboding that it had years ago when he’d looked up at the fireworks and said a storm was coming. “And our family is right in the middle of it.”
Needle in a Haystack

The TARDIS was quiet the next morning when Rose shuffled into the galley. She blinked a few times against the bright lights, a contrast from the dimly lit corridor. Then she smiled at the Doctor, who was waiting for her at the table with two cups of tea.

“Morning, love.” He pulled her chair out for her, and Rose sat down beside him. “Do you have anything in mind you’d like to do today?”

Rose sipped at her tea for a moment, letting the caffeinated beverage wake her up before she answered. “I told Jenny that she and Donna could go through the records of every person who was teleported back to the Library,” she told him. “Hopefully they’ll find Lee.”

The Doctor leaned back in his chair, holding his mug cradled between his hands. “I told Donna the same thing.”

A hint of wounded pride caught Rose by surprise, and she studied the Doctor over the rim of her cup. His lower lip protruded in a pout, and after setting her tea down, she stretched up to catch it in a quick kiss.

The Doctor hummed his approval and placed his hand on the back of her head, adjusting the angle to deepen the kiss. Rose’s initial intention had been to distract him, but she willingly opened her mouth beneath his and grabbed onto his lapel.

After a few delicious moments, he nipped at her bottom lip, then scraped his teeth over it as he pulled out of the kiss. “Mmm… I love you,” he murmured, then pressed another quick kiss to her lips before letting her go.

Rose smiled. “I love you, too. But I’m curious… what did Donna say to you that ruffled your feathers?”

The TARDIS flashed the lights, which was her way of letting them know that Donna and Jenny would be there soon. The Doctor pushed back from the table and got up to start breakfast, and Rose waited patiently for him to answer her question.

He rummaged around in the pantry for a moment before returning with the flour and eggs in hand. “She didn’t appreciate my attempt at encouraging her to find Lee.”

Rose watched him as he started preparing Dutch babies. An idea was brewing in the back of her mind, and she posed it to him as a question while he cracked the eggs into a mixing bowl. “Just tell me this, love,” she said. “Did you happen to mention Lance at all in your… encouragement?”

The Doctor stopped beating the eggs and milk, and looked at her over his shoulder. “Why would that make a difference?” he asked, which answered her question.

Rose sighed. “Because reminding people of past failures isn’t generally considered encouraging.”

He shook his head while he measured the flour. “But Lance wasn’t a failure!” He snorted. “If anything, he was a lucky escape. I mean, she was lucky to escape him.”

The Doctor’s blindness to human insecurity was one of his most endearing, frustrating traits. He just… believed so deeply in the value of everyone he met that it seldom occurred to him that they
might not believe as strongly in themselves.

“Yeah, I know that and you know that,” Rose agreed. “But trust me when I say that’s not how Donna sees it. And promise me you won’t mention Lance to her again.”

The Doctor frowned, but shrugged after a moment. It didn’t make sense to him, but he trusted Rose’s judgement, especially when it came to understanding people.

“I won’t mention it again,” he promised.

“Thank you.” Rose stood up and refilled the kettle. “So, back to what we’re going to do today, I really want to work on finding Lee.”

The Doctor set his batter aside and used a hot mitt to pull out the pan that had been heating in the oven since just before Rose had joined him. He dropped butter into it, and a moment later, the fat was sizzling as it melted.

“Agreed.”

Breakfast was in the oven with only a few minutes left on the timer when Jenny joined them, fresh-faced from the shower. “Morning, Dad!” She kissed him on the cheek, then hugged Rose. “Morning, Mum!”

The Doctor felt that tug at his hearts again. Three months after Jenny’s arrival, he was starting to understand that it would never really go away. “Good morning, Jenny. Sleep well?”

Jenny nodded, sending her ponytail bouncing as she started her coffee in the French press. “Yeah, I was fine. I think the TARDIS made sure all the thoughts in my head were good ones, because I didn’t even wake up once.”

Rose arched an eyebrow in his direction, but the Doctor shook his head in answer to her question. Then the ship hummed, and the Doctor, Rose, and Jenny all exchanged a smile.

“What are you lot smiling about?” Donna grumbled as she entered the room. The crease in the middle of her forehead and the dark shadows under her eyes told the story of a very different night from Jenny’s.

The TARDIS shrugged apologetically in the Doctor’s mind in response to his query. He frowned, but unfortunately, he was all too familiar with trauma that ran too deep for even a telepathic ship to wipe the pain away without aftereffects.

*What exactly happened to her in the Library’s computer?* He adjusted the question almost immediately. *What exactly did she lose?*

He remembered what he’d said to Mr. Lux about Cal’s life in the computer—the perfect life. His stomach sank as he considered what Donna’s perfect life might have been. How much of a life had the computer simulated for them?

Jenny pulled two mugs out of the cabinet and poured milk into one and sugar in the other. As soon as the coffee was done, she poured two cups and handed the milky one to Donna. “Here you go. Come on, let’s sit down while Dad finishes breakfast.”

Donna dropped into the chair beside Rose, then closed her eyes and breathed in the coffee aroma. While her eyes were shut, Jenny shot a pleading look at Rose.
Rose nodded, and when Donna opened her eyes and settled into her chair, she said, “So, we were talking about plans for the day before the two of you joined us.”

Donna’s long hair whipped around her head as she turned to look at her. “The Doctor told me we could look through all the information about the people who were in the Library looking for Lee.”

Jenny twisted her body to look back at her dad, who was leaning back on the counter with his hands stuck in his pockets. “Exactly, Donna. I thought that as soon as we were done with breakfast, I’d transfer the files to a data pad so you could sit in the library and look through them. There should be pictures attached, which would make finding Lee easy peasy.”

Jenny rested her chin on top of the chair back and wrapped her fingers around the rungs. “Do you have two data pads?” It hurt to see the hollow expression in Donna’s eyes, and she wanted to help somehow. “I knew Lee too, so I could help look for him.”

The Doctor nodded. “Absolutely. So we’re agreed? After breakfast, we’ll find Lee.”

Some of Donna’s exhaustion faded, replaced with gratitude that she had friends willing to take time out of their normal lives to look for a person who might not even exist. She nodded fervently in response to the Doctor’s question, already imagining her reunion with Lee.

But of course, it wasn’t that simple. When the Doctor opened the file directory where the TARDIS had saved all the information on the four thousand twenty-four people she’d pulled out of the Library mainframe, they discovered the data had been corrupted in transcription.

Donna pressed her lips into a thin line when row after row of computer code scrolled over the screen, instead of the set of pictures she’d expected. It looked like gibberish to her. “Well, that’s it then. I guess I’m not finding Lee.”

The Doctor had already bent over the keyboard and was working furiously. “I’m not giving up that easily, Donna Noble,” he swore. “I promised you would be able to find Lee, and we’re going to make sure that happens. It’ll just be a little more difficult than what we thought, that’s all.”

“What are you doing, Doctor?” Rose asked.

“I’m going to run file recovery programs.” He pushed his glasses up on his nose and peered at the monitor, then shook his head and started typing again. “It might take some time, but all the information is here, and between the TARDIS and me, we should be able to get it back.”

Donna sighed. “Yeah, all right.” She appreciated the Doctor’s enthusiasm, but with every barrier that went up, she felt more like the universe was trying to tell her something.

Hang on. Why am I letting the universe have its way?

She straightened up. “Yeah, all right,” she repeated, but this time, she felt hopeful instead of resigned. “I’m gonna go call Gramps. It’s been a few weeks since I’ve talked to him. You come find me as soon as you’ve got something for us to look at.”

oOoOoOo

It was almost supper-time when the Doctor knocked on her door. Donna flung it open and immediately doubled over in laughter when she saw his hair sticking up in a million directions.

“You look like a hedgehog!” she said.
He ran his hand through his hair, and as he did, she realised his messy look was an indicator of how much work he’d put into finding Lee for her. She could easily imagine him, sitting at a computer terminal for hours, raking his hands through his hair and tugging in exasperation when he couldn’t get the data to cooperate.

Her laughter faded immediately. “Thank you, Doctor.”

He tugged on his ear. “Don’t thank me quite yet,” he told her, sounding aggravated. “The data was far more corrupted than I’d anticipated, and it’s taking forever to recover the files. However, I’ve gotten six hundred of them back. Jenny’s waiting for you in the library with the tablets.”

Donna felt her face tighten as her smile became strained, but she refused to take her frustration out on the Doctor. “Well, thanks anyway. Hopefully Lee is in that six hundred.”

The Doctor blinked, then shook his head. “Donna, you don’t think I’m giving up, do you? I’ll start over again tomorrow, and I’ll keep going for as long as it takes to recover all the files.” He paused and looked at the ceiling for a moment before grinning at her. “Or until we find Lee, whichever comes first.”

Donna’s eyes widened and her mouth hung open. “Why would you go to that much effort, just to find someone who might be a figment of my imagination?”

“Because you deserve to be happy.” He stuck his hands into his pockets and shrugged. “I’m just sorry I can’t do more.”

Donna recoiled slightly from the uncharacteristically sober expression on the Doctor’s face. “What are you talking about?” she demanded.

He held her gaze steadily. “Donna… Jenny isn’t my first child.”

The seemingly random revelation threw Donna, and she felt her forehead creasing. “What?”

“I had kids before, on Gallifrey.” He took a deep breath, puffing his cheeks out. “And I lost them all in the war. My whole family.”

Donna was suddenly, horribly aware of where this conversation was going. She crossed her arms over her chest and glared at the Doctor. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, Spaceman,” she said, but the words didn’t have her usual edge.

He shook his head. “I know what it’s like to lose a child, Donna. There’s an emptiness in your eyes that I’ve seen before, in the mirror. And I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

Tears welled up in Donna’s eyes. She’d been telling herself she didn’t need to grieve, that Joshua and Ella weren’t real, but they’d been real to her.

“Two,” she gasped. “A son and a daughter. And they’re gone now.” She shook her head. “They never really existed.”

The Doctor’s eyes were dark with sympathy. “Oh, Donna.”

He held his arms out, and she fell into them as her tears finally spilled over. Donna lost track of how much time passed as the Doctor held her while she cried, occasionally rambling brokenly about Ella’s favourite colour or Joshua’s love of dinosaurs.

And the whole time, the Doctor held her close, letting her tears soak through his brown suit jacket
and even into his shirt. When her sobs finally slowed to sniffles, embarrassment washed over her and she pulled back, ready to deflect any criticism with sarcasm.

Instead, he smiled gently. “Feel better?”

Fresh tears sprung to her eyes at his kindness. She stared at the ceiling for a moment, willing them to stop. “A little.”

“Good. Then I think Rose and Jenny have dinner ready for us, and after that, you and Jenny can look through the first batch of pictures.”

“I’ll be right there.” Donna swiped at her eyes. “I need to clean my face before I join you.”

The Doctor nodded and left her room, and Donna went into the ensuite to wipe off her ruined makeup. Her eyes were hot and scratchy from crying, so she left her face bare rather than try to conceal the puffiness.

Jenny and Rose didn’t comment on it though, and by the time dinner was over, Donna’s emotions felt a little less raw. She and Jenny settled in on the couch in the library, flipping through the pictures on the data pads.

Lee wasn’t in either set of pictures. When they found the Doctor and Rose in the media room, he accepted the data pads back without question. “Same time tomorrow?” he asked as he tucked them into his pocket. “I reckon it’ll take me most of the day to recover a decent number of pictures again.”

“Yeah, sure,” Donna agreed.

oOoOoOo

“I’ve got him!!”

Donna tossed her data pad down on the couch next to her and scooted closer to Jenny to look over her shoulder. After a week with no luck, she almost didn’t believe they’d found him… but there was Lee, smiling back at her.

Her hand was trembling when she reached for the device. “Oh, my God.” Her head swam for a moment, and she tried to grasp that the search was over. “That’s… that’s him, that’s really him. He’s real!” She squealed and pulled Jenny into an ecstatic hug. “Thank you for not letting me give up.”

Jenny laughed and hugged her back. “Of course he was real, Donna. Here, take it and go find Dad. I think he’s in his work room.”

Donna clutched the data pad tight as she left the library at a fast jog. They’d found Lee, and now they could go pick him up, and hopefully…

She shrugged. From what she remembered of her life in the computer, everything she’d told Lee about her life had been real. He’d gotten to know the real Donna, and he’d fallen in love with her. Hopefully the person she’d fallen in love with had been the real Lee, and they could fumble through a relationship in the real world as easily as they had in the virtual reality.

The door to the Doctor’s workshop was ajar, and she pushed her way in without knocking. “We’ve found him!” She brandished the device.

The Doctor spun around from the tangled wires he’d been working on, a broad grin stretching across his face. “Brilliant!” he exclaimed. “Here, let me see where we’re going.”
He snatched the data pad from her and scrolled through the information on Lee. “Lee McAvoy. In the flesh. Or well, in a photograph, but soon to be in the flesh as soon as we…”

His voice trailed off, and he moved his finger up and down on the screen, scrolling through the information again. “Donna.”

“Don’t you say my name like that, Spaceman,” Donna bit out. “You only say it like that when you’re afraid I’m going to slap you.”

The Doctor flinched. “Well… It’s just… You found Lee, but there’s no location listed.”

“What.”

He flipped the pad around so she could see the blank lines. “See?”

Donna flicked her finger over the screen, hoping she would find the missing information just slightly out of place, but there was nothing. “Well isn’t that wizard,” she muttered. “All right, what’s next?”

The Doctor slid the data pad into his pocket. “Come on, let’s get Rose and Jenny. Maybe if we all put our heads together, we can come up with something.”

He stuck his hands in his pockets as he stalked through the TARDIS to the library. Rose was immediately aware of his rapidly cycling moods and sent him a wordless query.

*It’s this Donna and Lee situation. Could you meet us in the library? I’ll explain it when we’re all together, and maybe we can come up with a solution.*

There was only one answer he could think of, but he was hoping Rose could come up with something faster and more… well, definite. He was almost positive Donna wouldn’t like his suggestion.

Jenny blinked when her entire family entered the library at once. She put down the book she’d just picked up and scooted to the end of the couch so there was room for everyone.

Her dad stayed standing, pacing in front of the fireplace with a data pad in his hands. Jenny’s hearts fell when she realised it must be the same one Donna had just run victoriously out of the room with. Now she was curled into the corner of the couch, trying to make herself as small as possible.

“What’s wrong, Dad?”

He gestured with the data pad. “We still don’t know where Lee is, that’s what’s wrong.”

“What do you mean?” Rose asked. “I thought you found him.”

“We found his picture,” Donna corrected, cutting off the Doctor’s explanation. “Just a picture, no other information.”

Jenny let her head flop against the back of the couch. *Why can’t we catch a break? Just one,* she begged the universe.

“Not even a name,” the Doctor elaborated.

Donna shrugged and traced the pattern on the upholstery with her finger. “I guess that explains why that librarian I asked said there hadn’t been anyone named Lee McAvoy in the Library that day.”

“Wait a minute,” Rose said. “I thought everyone in the fifty-first century had that bioscan chip. As
soon as they used the Library’s teleport, all the meta data on the chip should have been uploaded to the computer. That’s where the pictures came from, right?”

The Doctor rocked back on his heels and nodded. “Right you are, Rose! Some people manage to delete the information off their chips, but that’s not common. Typically, only people who want to be untraceable go to the effort.”

Donna looked from the Doctor to Rose and back again. “Are you saying Lee might have been a spy?”

The Doctor tilted his head. “Possibly. Or he could have been a conspiracy theory nutter.”

“He was not a nutter,” Donna said fiercely.

The Doctor held up his hands. “Right, sorry. Ahh…” He shrugged. “Can anyone else think of reasons someone would delete all the information from their chip?”

“Some kind of government protection?” Jenny could vividly remember a number of movies they’d watched where the main character had been forced to give up everything about their past life to go on the run.

“Time Agent?” Rose suggested.

The Doctor’s eyebrows rose. “Interesting possibility. I could see why agents doing certain kind of field work would need to have blank chips.”

He pressed his tongue to the back of his teeth. “Of course, it’s possible the data was simply so badly corrupted that none of my recovery tools could touch it. I’d expect to see strings of unreadable code instead of blank lines, but sometimes, who knows why computers do what they do.”

“Look, does it really matter why his chip was blank?” Donna finally snapped. “No matter what the reason is, the result’s the same, right? We can’t find him.”

Rose felt her face heat as she turned and looked at her friend. “I’m sorry, Donna. We got a little caught up in the mystery.”

She snorted. “Of course you did. That’s what you do.”

“And we can find him,” the Doctor broke in, before Donna could go off on another tirade or storm out of the room to hide how upset she was.

“Yeah, how’s that going to work then?” Donna challenged. “We’ll put up missing posters around the galaxy? ‘Have you seen this man?’”

Rose shook her head, already following the Doctor’s train of thought. “No, but the TARDIS can do a scan for him. She’s got his DNA—Jenny and I saw him in the Library, so we know that he definitely was pulled out of the Library by the TARDIS. And with his DNA and the year, we can set up a scan.”

Donna crossed her arms over her chest and narrowed her eyes. “And why didn’t you just suggest that when the data was corrupt, instead of spending all this time rebuilding the files?”

The Doctor sighed and sat down in one of the arm chairs. “Because it will take time, Donna. If his chip had had the proper information on it, we would be there by now. Running a scan like this… even when we’re able to narrow it to a year, it’ll take a long time.”
Donna wanted to scream and throw things, and she wanted to curl up in her bed and have a good cry. “How long?”

“Months, probably.” He scratched at his cheek. “I was hoping Rose would have a better idea, but I think this is really our only option.”

Donna heard the softest sound from the opposite end of the couch and knew that Jenny wasn’t sure it was a good idea to keep looking for Lee. Even though she’d never said a word, Donna knew Jenny had qualms about the whole search in the first place.

And now it was going in a very different direction. It was one thing to spend a few evenings looking at pictures, hoping to find him. That wasn’t really much effort to expend.

Leaving a search open for months meant dedicating a lot of emotional energy to it. Right now, if Lee rejected her, or if things just didn’t work out between them, the hurt would be bearable. If she spent the next several months looking and things didn’t go well…

Donna shuddered. She’d already lost one relationship after investing time and energy into it. Reason told her to walk away.

But reason didn’t have memories of years spent reading the paper over Lee’s shoulder, taking sips of his coffee. Or watching their children play together. Or waking up late on Sunday mornings with his strong body spooning her.

“Yeah, all right,” Donna said. “Run the scan.”

The Doctor held her gaze for a long moment, then he nodded. “All right. I’ll go get it started right now.”

Jenny stood at the same time. “I’ll come with you, Dad.”

When they were gone, Donna looked at Rose. “What would you do, if you were ever separated from the Doctor?”

The lights flickered, and Donna looked up at the ceiling before looking back at Rose. “Why do I get the feeling that isn’t just a rhetorical question?”

Rose turned and crossed one leg under her knee. The TARDIS was thinking about Bad Wolf, but that hadn’t been about being with the Doctor—it had been about wanting to keep him safe.

Krop Tor, though… “It’s happened a few times.” Rose ran her hand through her hair, quickly debating how much detail was really necessary to answer Donna’s question. “We’ve been separated, and it seemed like there was no way we’d ever make it back to each other.”

“You didn’t give up.”

Donna’s words weren’t a question, but Rose answered anyway. “Never. No matter how impossible it seems, I would never stop looking for him.” Aborted timelines teased the edges of Rose’s awareness. “Even if… even if I were trapped in a parallel universe, I would find a way to come home.”

Donna bit her lip. “What if you’d been separated before you were together?” she asked. “I mean… if you were just friends, and something happened…”

Rose blinked a few times. She and the Doctor had never been just friends, so it was hard to think in
Then a memory resurfaced, one she hadn’t thought about in years. The TARDIS disappearing from the alley after she’d turned down the Doctor’s first offer to travel with him.

“I think… I would still try,” she said slowly. “I know what you’re thinking, Donna. You’re afraid you’ll find him and he won’t want you. But think about it from his perspective. You’re desperate to find him—imagine he wants to get back to you just as badly.”

Rose had been instantly aware of her mistake, but she hadn’t let herself wallow in regret. In the few seconds it had taken the Doctor to come back for her, she’d already formed a vague plan to start looking for him, somehow.

“Only he doesn’t have a TARDIS,” she continued, remembering how aware she’d been of the impossibility of the task. “He has no way to even begin looking for you.” She reached out and took Donna’s hand, giving it a reassuring squeeze. “It’s scary to think about putting yourself out there like this, but imagine what it would feel like if you had no way of finding him.”

Donna’s eyes watered. “Yeah. Yeah, all right.”

But she wasn’t all right, and as Donna and Rose walked up to the console room to check in on the Doctor and Jenny, an idea built slowly in the back of her mind. Once the Doctor confirmed that the scan had been started, she took a deep breath.

“I want to go home.” Her voice broke a little on the last word, and she swallowed back the lump in her throat. “I haven’t seen my granddad in months. When I talked to him last week, he said Mum would be taking her annual weekend getaway with her ladies’ group, leaving him alone at the house.”

Sympathy burned in the Doctor’s eyes, and she flinched away from it. “Just take me home, Spaceman.”

He nodded and moved to the navigation controls. “Tell me when and where.”

Donna dropped into the jump seat and slouched immediately, resting her head against the seat back. She told the Doctor where to find her grandfather, then watched, feeling strangely detached as he moved around the console, adjusting the controls. When he pulled the dematerialisation lever and the time rotor started moving, Donna stared at it.

The trip seemed to take longer than most of them, but finally, the ship landed. Donna looked at the door, then at the Doctor. “We’re here?”

He stuck his hands in his jacket pockets and nodded. “We’re exactly where you wanted to go.”

Donna slid off the jump seat, then she looked at the Doctor with her lips pursed and arched an eyebrow. “And you’re sure you got the date right? I’m not going to open the door and find out I’ve been gone for a year, am I?”

He pouted, and Rose giggled. “We’re in 2009,” she promised Donna. “Go on. We’ll just stay right here, and when you’re ready to travel again, you can come back.”

When Donna reached the door, she pushed it open slowly, sticking only her head out. But as soon as she did, the door was wrenched out of her hands and familiar hands pulled her out of the TARDIS.

“Donna!” her granddad cheered. “You’ve come home for a visit, sweetheart!”
Donna rested her head on his shoulder and smiled in the direction of the telescope set up on the hill.
“Yeah. I’m home.”
A month later, they were back to their old life, travelling in the TARDIS. Donna had spent a week with her grandfather, taking him on a surprise trip to Italy when her mother had gotten back from her weekend away.

The TARDIS was still scanning the fifty-first century, looking for Lee. The Doctor checked the results every morning, and after a few days, Donna had stopped asking if he’d found anything. He’d tell her when he did.

Today, they were taking a day off from the travelling. Rose had holed herself up in the library to read while the Doctor tinkered and Jenny and Donna relaxed in the pool.

“Mum?”

Rose looked up from her book when Jenny called her name. The title still felt new and a bit weird, but she liked it.

“What did you need, Jenny?” Rose’s back twinged, and she realised she’d been sitting in the same position for too long. She winced, then stretched out while Jenny sat down in the other armchair flanking the fireplace.

“Donna was telling me about an Earth custom… a spa day?”

Rose chuckled. “I bet she was. Did you want to experience one for yourself, see what it’s like?”

Jenny nodded eagerly. “She said it’s something girlfriends and mums and daughters do together. Maybe we could find something for Dad to do, and we could have a spa day?”

“Oh, that sounds amazing,” Rose sighed. “I haven’t had a proper girls’ day in… oh, years.” She set her book down on the table with a bookmark holding her place, then stood up and smiled at Jenny. “Come on, let’s go read through the TARDIS’ travel guides and see if we can find a planet with something suitably exciting for the Doctor, and a spa for us.”

The Doctor was thrilled when the three women presented him with the request to go to Midnight. Rose had remembered the name when they came across it and knew he’d been wanting to go on the tour of the diamond planet for years.

He was less thrilled when he realised they intended to pack him off on the tour alone while they enjoyed the other amenities of the leisure palace. “But it’s no fun if I go alone,” he protested. “Come on, it’s just four hours—then you can have your spa day in the afternoon.”

Donna snorted. “No, that’s four hours there and four hours back. That’s like a school trip. I’d rather go sunbathing.”

The Doctor shook his head. “And that’s another thing—Midnight’s sun is Xtonic. Is it even safe to sunbathe?”

Jenny patted his shoulder. “It’s fine, Dad. It says in the guide book that the glass enclosure over the leisure palace is fifteen feet thick.”

He bounced on his toes and Rose held up a hand before he could say anything more. “And don’t try luring us in with the sapphire waterfall and the Cliffs of Oblivion. We read all about it, and we still
want to have our spa day.”

His shoulders slumped and he sighed in defeat. “All right, I give up. Next stop, Midnight: the Planet of Diamonds. Also home to one of the best spa resorts in the galaxy, if you go for that kind of thing.” He twirled his finger in their direction. “You’d better pack your bags, ladies.”

Rose pointed to the door, where three suitcases were waiting. “Oh, we’re ready,” she assured him.

Thirty minutes later, they were checked in to rooms in the resort and Rose was walking the Doctor to the embarkation area for the tour busses. The long hallway was made almost entirely of glass, giving passengers a view of craggy spires sparkling in the sunlight.

“Better not tell Mum about this,” Rose muttered. “A planet made of diamonds? She wouldn’t care if they were poisoned.”

“Do you remember Scotland and the werewolf?” the Doctor asked.

Rose laughed. “And how we joked that Mum would fight the werewolf for the diamond?” Another memory came fast on the heels of that one. “That was when we first started to realise Bad Wolf had permanently changed me,” she added.

The Doctor hummed and wrapped an arm around her shoulders. “Best news I’ve ever gotten.”

Rose snorted. “You practically had a panic attack when I asked you what the werewolf meant.”

“Well…” He tugged on his ear. “I didn’t realise it was good news at the time.”

They finally reached the gate printed on the Doctor’s ticket and stopped a few feet from the ticket counter. He pointed at the gate agent, looking bored as he stared at the computer in front of him.

“You’re sure I can’t talk you into coming with me?” The Doctor squeezed her hand. “It could be fun, just the two of us.”

Rose shook her head. “Jenny asked for this, love. Donna told her that spa days are something mums and daughters do together.”

Warm affection immediately replaced his slightly petulant attitude. “Ah. Well, that’s a different story then.”

“Yeah. Plus, I’m really looking forward to it. I haven’t had a girls’ day in forever—not a proper, Earth-like girls’ day, with all the pampering and fruity drinks and giggling over the funny stories we’ve shared.” Rose stretched up to peck the Doctor on the cheek. “So you have fun on your tour, and when you get back, we’ll try that anti-gravity restaurant—just the two of us.”

The Doctor grinned. “The one with bibs?”

Rose straightened his tie. “Yep!”

“That’s a date, Rose Tyler.” He wrapped an arm around her waist and tugged her close, then bent down and kissed her quickly before pulling back. “You ladies have a fun time, telling all your jokes at my expense.” Rose feigned shock, and he shook his head. “Oh, I know exactly what kinds of funny stories you’ll pull out.”

Rose gave him his favourite teasing smile, and he shook his head and kissed her again, lingering a bit longer this time. In fact, it was the last call for boarding that finally reminded them both that he had
somewhere to be, and he reluctantly let go of her.

“Have fun, Doctor,” Rose said as she stepped away from him. “And be careful.”

He winked. “Nah. Taking a big space truck with a bunch of strangers across a diamond planet called Midnight? What could possibly go wrong?”

The Doctor waved jauntily the other passengers on the mostly-full bus as he walked on. The couple near the door rolled their eyes, and the woman muttered something that sounded like, “Finally.” He shoved his hands into his pockets and made his way forward, sitting in front of a young woman who was the only person to wave back at him.

A woman at the back of the bus caught his eye, and her sky blue Oxford shirt and the company badge stitched to her blazer told him she was the Hostess. She hustled forward with the refreshments trolley and started handing him things, one after the other.

“That’s the headphones for channels one to thirty-six. Modem link for 3D vidgames. Complimentary earplugs. Complimentary slippers.” His lap was almost full, and she moved on to the snack items. “Complimentary juice pack and complimentary peanuts. I must warn you some products may contain nuts.”

“That’ll be the peanuts,” the Doctor said, unable to resist.

The customer service smile disappeared from her face, her lips pressed into a thin line instead. “Enjoy your trip.”

“Oh, I can’t wait. Allons-y,” the Doctor chirped as she started to push the trolley away.

She sighed and turned back to him. “I’m sorry?”

“It’s French, for let’s go,” he explained, a little less vibrancy in his voice.

“Fascinating,” she said through clenched teeth.

The Doctor grimaced when she walked away. He’d certainly managed to make a poor impression right off the bat. Hoping to smooth over some ruffled feathers, he looked at the blonde woman sitting on the other side of the aisle, reading a book.

“I cut it a bit fine, I know,” he said, and she looked up at him. “Just lost track of time, saying goodbye to my wife. You know how it is.”

Her already cold expression turned frosty. “I’m afraid I don’t, since I’ve found myself single rather recently, not by choice.”

“Oh,” The Doctor tugged on his ear. “I’m sorry to hear that,” he offered, and she nodded once.

“What happened?”

The woman shrugged, but it was a brittle motion, meant to convey nonchalance she did not feel. “Oh, the usual. She needed her own space, as they say. A different galaxy, in fact. I reckon that’s enough space, don’t you?”

The Doctor nodded, but he really didn’t know what else to say to that. The woman nodded again, sharply, and went back to her book.
Feeling truly awkward for once in his life, the Doctor sat quietly for a moment. But he couldn’t remain still for long, and only a few seconds passed before he was turning his head, taking in the interior of the bus.

The tiny windows in the hull captured his attention right away, and the Doctor perked up. He hadn’t imagined they’d be able to look outside while they drove across Midnight. He glanced back at the Hostess, parking the trolley in the back of the bus, but before he could ask her about the windows, the man sitting behind him leaned forward and tapped him on the shoulder.


“I’m the Doctor,” he said, aware that a relieved smile had stretched across his face. At least someone will talk to me. “Hello.”

“It’s my fourteenth time,” Professor Hobbes said, rather self-importantly.

The Doctor’s eyes widened. “Oh. My first.” This will be new, not being the most experienced person in the group.

The young woman who’d smiled at the Doctor when he’d gotten on the bus stood up and offered him her hand. “And I’m Dee Dee, Dee Dee Blasco.”

“Don’t bother the man,” Professor Hobbes chided. “Where’s my water bottle?”

The Doctor winked at Dee Dee as she assured the professor that they had all the necessary supplies, and she shrugged, as if to say, “That’s just what he’s like.”

The remaining passenger was a teenage boy dressed in all black. Judging by the way the lad was pointedly ignoring the couple by the door, the Doctor guessed they were his parents.

His attention was pulled back to the Hostess as she strode up the aisle from the rear of the vehicle. “Ladies and gentlemen, and variations thereupon, welcome on board the Crusader Fifty.” At the cabin door, she turned around to face them, that professional smile back in place. “If you would fasten your seat belts, we’ll be leaving any moment.”

She smirked at them while they all fumbled with the seat belts. Once they were properly buckled in, she checked her watch, then nodded. “Doors.”

The doors closed, shutting them off from the hangar bay they were parked in.

“Shields down,” she continued, motioning with her hands.

Shielded visors lowered over the windows, dashing the Doctor’s hopes of watching the landscape of Midnight as they travelled. He sighed, but supposed he should have guessed—the bus certainly didn’t have fifteen feet of glass protecting them from the poisonous rays.

“I’m afraid the view is shielded until we reach the Waterfall Palace,” the Hostess explained. “Also, a reminder. Midnight has no air, so please don’t touch the exterior door seals,” she cautioned, pointing to seals. “Fire exit at the rear, and should we need to use it, you first.”

The Doctor stifled a laugh. If Midnight had no air and the sunlight was toxic, using the fire exit would be the equivalent of leaping from the fire into the frying pan.

After giggling at her own joke, she said, “Now I will hand you over to Driver Joe.”
“Driver Joe at the wheel,” spoke a voice over the intercom.

A topographical map of Midnight appeared on the screen on the wall, and the Doctor put on his glasses to bring it into focus.

“There’s been a diamond fall at the Winter Witch Canyon, so we’ll be taking a slight detour, as you’ll see on the map.” The typical route was highlighted in orange, while their detour was done in blue. “The journey covers five hundred kliks to the Multifaceted Coast. Duration is estimated at four hours. Thank you for travelling with us, and as they used to say in the olden days, wagons roll.”

There was a bit of turbulence as they left the dock, and the Doctor shifted in his seat, excited to finally be on the way.

The Hostess smiled and lifted her chin, drawing their attention back to her. “For your entertainment, we have the Music Channel playing retrovids of Earth classics.”

She pressed a button on the remote in her hand, and a set of screens popped down from the ceiling, showing a music video from the 1980s.

“And, the latest artistic installation from Ludovico Klein.”

She pressed another button, and they were immersed in a holographic art display. The Doctor would have found it interesting—and Rose would have loved it—but it was impossible to focus on the art when the video was playing at the same time.

“Plus, for the youngsters, a rare treat. The Animation Archives.” A large screen dropped down in front of the cabin door, and a Betty Boop cartoon started playing.

Any one of the three forms of entertainment might have been interesting, but together, they were nothing but noise. The Hostess didn’t seem to think so. “Four hours of fun time. Enjoy,” she said unironically, then disappeared to the back of the bus.

The Doctor looked at the three different displays, utterly unenthused. It’s tempting… He glanced around at his fellow passengers, seeing if anyone else was interested in the entertainment. The blonde woman looked up from her book and heaved a sigh, then rolled her eyes when she caught him looking at her.

That was all the encouragement he needed. Especially given his blunder with her earlier, he was happy to do what he could to make her trip just a little bit nicer. He pulled the sonic screwdriver out of his pocket, and five seconds later, the screens went dark and returned to their docks.

“Well, that’s a mercy,” Professor Hobbes said.

“Ah, I do apologise, ladies and gentlemen, and variations thereupon,” the Hostess said as she walked forward, frantically hitting the buttons on her remote.

The Doctor ducked his head so she wouldn’t see his smile; her remote wouldn’t do a bit of good. He’d disabled the entertainment system permanently, at least until they did a hard reboot of the software.

The Hostess didn’t know that though, and she frowned in vexation when the remote didn’t work. “We seem to have had a failure of the entertainment system.”

“Oh,” the Doctor said, feigning dismay. The woman across the aisle looked at him knowingly, and he thought he saw a hint of gratitude in her eyes.
“But what do we do?” the woman by the door asked.

“We’ve got four hours of this?” her husband added. “Four hours of just sitting here?”

“Tell you what.” The Doctor turned around and kneeled on his seat. “We’ll have to talk to each other instead.”

The blonde woman shook her head and bent closer to her book. None of the other passengers were enthused by the idea either, but the Doctor didn’t let their obvious dismay deter him.

“Let’s start with names, shall we? I’m the Doctor.”

Fifteen minutes after leaving the Doctor at the shuttle bay, Rose used the keycard she’d been given to slip into her room at the resort. She, Jenny, and Donna had taken a quick look at the options on offer, and the vote had been unanimous—swimming and sunbathing first, followed by massages and then lunch. And that meant the very first thing to do was change into her swimming costume.

The Doctor seemed happy, and she reached out to him as she opened up the suitcase. *Having a good time, love? Are you impressing all the other passengers?*

To her surprise, he turned a little sheepish. *It was a bit of a rough start, but I think we’re getting along well now. I might have turned off the onboard entertainment so we’d be forced to actually talk.*

Rose pulled out her bikini and wrap, shaking her head at him. That sounded like him, but she was familiar enough with this century’s ideas of entertainment—a constant bombardment of noise—to guess that most people were actually grateful.

*What are you up to?* he asked.

A sly smile crossed Rose’s face. She quickly changed into the suit and pulled her hair up in a messy bun, then looked at herself in the mirror and nodded. *Just getting ready to go swimming with the girls,* she told him casually. A second later, she let him see exactly what she looked like, in her skimpy red bikini with tendrils of hair framing her face.

*Oh… that’s not fair,* he groaned.

Rose closed her eyes and focused on the bond, and a moment later, she was standing in front of the Doctor. She pressed a finger to her collarbone and traced a line down to the deep V of her bikini top, and his eyes tracked her movements hungrily.

*Just a tease, since you can’t be here to enjoy it in person,* she told him.

The Doctor reached for her, and the feeling of his cool hand on her bare skin sent a shiver down Rose’s back. He leaned down and nipped at her earlobe, then whispered, *You know I love it when you tease me, Rose, but you also know that I return your teasing, with interest.*

Rose drew in a shuddering breath when the Doctor brushed his nose along her jawline, his lips close enough that she could feel his breath. He finally pressed a lingering kiss to the corner of her mouth before lifting his head to give her a knowing smile.

*I’ll see you tonight.*
The bond faded back into the background, and Rose sighed. *Time to get this girls' day started,* she told herself, wrapping a black sarong around her waist.

Jenny and Donna were already lounging by the pool when she arrived. “There you are,” Donna said, saluting with a hand holding a cocktail. “Oh, the Doctor is going to be disappointed he missed seeing that bikini.”

Rose smiled as she reclined in the third lounge chair. “He might have already gotten a glimpse,” she drawled. Jenny and Donna frowned blankly at her, and she tapped her temple. “What’s the point of sharing a telepathic bond with your husband if you don’t tease him with it sometimes?” Donna threw her head back and laughed, and Rose picked up the fruity cocktail waiting for her to accept her friend’s toast.

“I don’t know how you can handle drinking something that sweet,” Donna said, gesturing to Rose’s mai tai. “Can you even taste the alcohol under all that sugar?”

Rose took a sip and hummed—the resort had used her favourite Maldorian rum. “Not tasting the alcohol is the point, Donna,” she replied. “I like things a little sweet.” She thought of the Doctor pouring sugar into his tea and wrinkled her nose. “Not as sweet as the Doctor does…”

Jenny giggled. “No one likes things as sweet as Dad does.”

A hazy memory came back to Rose, and she focused on it for a minute before she started laughing. She’d only been teasing the Doctor when she’d mentioned telling funny stories at his expense, but this one was too good not to tell.

“You know how much he loves to eat jam, yeah?”

Donna snorted. “That’s hard to miss. At least he uses a spoon, I suppose.”

“Oh, but he hasn’t always,” Rose countered. She set her drink down and turned slightly in her chair to look at her audience. “I remember a time when he would just grab any jar of jam he saw and stick his fingers right in it, without even thinking.”

“Ewww!” Donna wrinkled her nose.

Rose smirked. “I haven’t even mentioned the best part, Donna. We weren’t at home when he did this.”

“You have got to be kidding me!” Donna said. “He just took a stranger’s jam jar and stuck his dirty fingers into it?”

Rose nodded. “The look I gave him…” She laughed. “Let’s just say he put the jar back, sharpish.”

After Rose’s teasing, it had taken a few minutes for the Doctor to settle back into reality on the bus. Honestly, when given a choice between spending the morning with his gorgeous wife in a bikini and spending that time getting to know a group of strangers, there was no contest.

But he hadn’t been given a choice. Rose had asked for a girls’ day, so here he was, on a bus with seven perfect strangers, listening to a recording of Jethro’s band.

The song faded into silence, and the young guitarist hit the stop button on his music player. The genuine applause he got brought a flush to his pale cheeks, and he actually managed a smile.
When the praise died down, the Hostess clapped twice. “May I have your attention please, ladies, gentlemen, and variations thereupon? At this time, there are refreshments available in the galley at the back of the vehicle. I would typically serve you myself, of course, but since we seem to be in a more casual mood today than usual, this seemed appropriate.”

The Doctor grinned and jumped to his feet. “Thank you—hang on, what’s your name?” he asked, realising suddenly that she’d never introduced herself when everyone else had. Even Sky Silvestry had given her name before promptly returning to her book.

The Hostess blinked twice, and the Doctor wondered how many of these tours she led without anyone asking her such a simple, humanising question. He tugged on his ear; he probably wouldn’t have thought of it, if it weren’t for Rose’s influence.

“Anniqua,” she said finally.

“Nice to meet you, Anniqua.” The Doctor held his hand out, and after a moment of hesitation, the Hostess shook it. “What part of the galaxy do you hail from?”

Some of the woman’s stiffness melted away as he kept talking to her like a person, instead of an employee. “I’m from Sto.”

The Doctor brightened. “Oh, I have a friend from Sto!” He remembered as soon as he said it that Astrid had lived close to a thousand years in the past, and he quickly added, “But of course I doubt you know her. Big planet, after all.”

“Yes…” A confused wrinkle appeared on her forehead, then she shook her head and straightened her skirt. “Now if you’ll excuse me, Doctor, I must get back to work.”

The Doctor watched her go, then meandered towards the galley, where Dee Dee was already pouring the first of two cups of coffee. “I’d ask if you were going to down your coffee double-fisted,” he said, “but I think I know who the other cup is for.”

Dee Dee shrugged as she set one mug down and picked the empty one up. “It’s why I’m here.”

He tilted his head. “Tell me about yourself, Dee Dee. How did you end up on this trip with the professor in the first place? If he’s been here fourteen times, I doubt there’s much he’s going to see that he hasn’t seen before.”

“I’m just a second-year student,” she explained, “but I wrote a paper on the Lost Moon of Poosh. Professor Hobbes read it, liked it, took me on as researcher, just for the holidays. Well, I say researcher.” She laughed self-deprecatingly as she turned around. “Most of the time he’s got me fetching and carrying,” she admitted. “But it’s all good experience.”

The Doctor sighed internally; humans never tired of peddling that lie when they wanted others to work for free. He quickly dismissed the topic of Professor Hobbes and focused on the one that intrigued him a great deal more.

When Dee Dee shifted a few steps to the right, the Doctor stepped up to the counter to pour a coffee for himself. “And did they ever find it?” he asked.

Dee Dee shook her head and frowned. “Find what?”

“The Lost Moon of Poosh,” the Doctor asked. A whole moon, lost! Now that was a subject worth discussing.
Dee Dee laughed. “Oh, no. Not yet.”

“Well,” the Doctor drawled, looking up at the ceiling. “Maybe that’ll be your great discovery, one day. Here’s to Poosh.”

The look in Dee Dee’s eyes was quietly pleased, like no one had ever suggested that she might make a discovery herself, rather than merely assisting the discoveries of others.

“Poosh,” she said, tapping her cup against the Doctor’s.

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After half an hour by the pool, Donna claimed the filtered sunlight was burning her fair skin. Resort staff helped them pull over a few large umbrellas for shade, and they’d continued to enjoy the relaxing atmosphere.

Even without direct sunlight, the comfortable warmth of the Midnight sun almost lulled Rose to sleep. In her relaxed state, her telepathic awareness sharpened.

Jenny was right next to her, and she felt her daughter return her warm greeting. The Doctor gave her the equivalent of a quick hug, along with a glimpse of the group on the tour bus.

Something else teased the edges of her senses, though—an unfamiliar presence. Rose shifted on the chaise lounge, trying to figure out where the unknown telepath was coming from, but she was almost immediately shut out by barriers stronger than anything she’d encountered before. Whoever it was, they were not interested in saying hello.

Rose’s eyes fluttered open, and she knew immediately she would not be able to relax again. They so rarely ran into other telepaths, and the way this person had managed to slam a door in her face, almost without trying, made her uneasy.

She focused on the time and breathed a sigh of relief when she realised she had a good excuse to leave the poolside.

“Come on, you two. It’s almost time for our massages.”

Rose swung her legs out of the chaise lounge and grabbed her bag while Donna and Jenny both yawned and blinked a few times. They put on normal clothes in the changing room, then Rose pulled a map of the resort out of her bag and led them to the massage salon.

As they walked, she casually reached out for the Doctor, eavesdropping a bit on his conversation and paying attention to his mood. By the time she was on the table, the Doctor’s obvious enjoyment of his trip eased most of her anxiety.

He’s on a tour bus, she reminded herself. The passengers all seem normal, and no one else can get in. What could be safer?

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After another forty-five minutes and a meal that was either chicken or beef, or maybe both, the Doctor looked around at his fellow travellers. “Well, does anyone else have an idea of how to pass the time?”

Professor Hobbes half-raised his hand. “I could tell you more about the planet, if you’re interested.”
Biff and Val both rolled their eyes, and Jethro, eager to spite his parents by any means possible, immediately leaned forward and rested his chin on the seat in front of him. “Go on, Professor,” he said, his eyes glittering.

The Doctor covered his mouth to hide his smile, but when the professor looked his direction, he nodded quickly. “Oh, absolutely,” he enthused. “I’d love to hear the things about Midnight that you wouldn’t find in a guidebook.”

Sky shook her head slightly and turned the page of her book. She hadn’t joined in any of the conversation, even though he’d tried to get her talking during lunch. The Doctor sighed; from her vague reference to her recent breakup, he could understand why she wanted to be left alone, but it was still too bad that she was holding herself back from everyone.

The professor and Dee Dee bustled around for a few minutes, getting a slide projector out of their bags and setting it up with Anniqua’s help. “You’ll learn things hardly anyone knows,” Professor Hobbes promised them as they set up. “Midnight proves the point that the more beautiful nature is, the deadlier it is.”

Val raised an eyebrow and leaned forward slightly. The professor didn’t notice her increased interest as he fumbled with getting the slides in the projector, but Biff did. He scowled slightly, but straightened in his seat as well, catching Val’s attention.

The slide carrel clicked into place and the professor walked up to the front of the bus as Dee Dee took his place at the projector. “We’ve sent exploratory robots onto the surface of Midnight.”

A picture of the blue diamond spires of Midnight filled the screen, and Val sucked in a breath. The Doctor pressed his lips together to hide his smile as she stood up, matched almost immediately by her husband.

“The diamonds are genuine, unlike the so-called Sapphire Waterfall,” he explained. “Made of pure carbon, they would be worth a fortune on the market… if it were possible to mine and sell them. Of course, that is not a possibility, because…”

He nodded at Dee Dee, who advanced to the next slide, a diagram showing Midnight orbiting the Xtonic sun. Professor Hobbes pointed at the planet at the centre of the slide. “So, this is Midnight, do you see, bombarded by the sun. Xtonic rays, raw galvanic radiation.”

His pronunciation was solemn, and everyone sat up slightly, paying a bit more attention. Even the Doctor, knowing all of this already, felt a little thrill at the reminder of the danger.

“Dee Dee, next slide.” His research assistant nodded quickly and hit the advance slide button.

“It’s my pet project,” the professor said, rather unnecessarily the Doctor thought, as Hobbes bounced lightly on his toes, an excited smile on his face. “Actually, I’m the first person to research this.” He smiled proudly and gestured with his pen. “Because, you see”—Hobbes sat down in the front row and looked back at them—“the history is fascinating.”

He studied them with wide eyes as he continued to speak in an almost conspiratorial voice. The Doctor got Rose’s attention and showed her what the professor looked like now. Is this what I look like when I start lecturing?

Bit more sexy, she teased. But yeah. That same contagious enthusiasm.

He nodded, understanding better why she found it so appealing, then focused back on the professor.
“There’s no life in this entire system,” Professor Hobbes said, his voice getting louder and faster with every word. “There couldn’t be. Before the Leisure Palace Company moved in, no one had come here in all eternity. No living thing,” he whispered, emphasising his word with his hands.

The bus was silent for a moment as that thought sank in. The Doctor smiled as he watched everyone but Sky look around, getting caught up in the fascination the professor was encouraging.

Everyone, that was, but Jethro. “But how do you know?” he asked, his chin raised in challenge.

The Doctor nodded approvingly; that was an excellent question.

A smirk played with the corners of Jethro’s mouth when he affected a shrug. “I mean, if no one can go outside.”

Val rolled her eyes. “Oh, his imagination. Here we go.”

“He’s got a point, though,” the Doctor countered, and Jethro straightened up slightly at the praise.

Professor Hobbes’ head bobbed a few times and he waved his pen at Jethro. “Exactly! We look upon this world through glass, safe inside our metal box.” He stood up, his eyes wide behind his glasses. “Even the Leisure Palace was lowered down from orbit,” he said, gesturing as he did so. “And here we are now, crossing Midnight, but never touching it.”

Before anyone could comment on that statement, the tour bus stopped, with an ominous grinding noise.

“We’ve stopped,” Val said, then shook her head. “Have we stopped?”

Biff glanced at his watch and the closed door. “Are we there?”

Dee Dee shook her head. “We can’t be. It’s too soon.”

“Th-they don’t stop,” the professor insisted. “Crusader vehicles never stop.”

Anniqua walked slowly to the front of the bus, an uncertain smile pasted on her face. “If you could just return to your seats. It’s just a small delay.” Then she spun around and walked quickly to the back of the vehicle, where she picked up the intercom handset to talk privately to the captain.

The passengers exchanged uneasy glances, but did as she said and sat back down.

“Maybe just a pit stop,” Biff suggested.

That idea would have made people feel better, except Professor Hobbes quickly jumped in to deny the possibility. “There’s no pit to stop in. I’ve been on this expedition fourteen times. They never stop.”

The Doctor had been watching Sky from the moment the bus had ground to a halt. As soon as the noise shattered the stillness of the trip, she’d dropped her book and sat ramrod straight, with her hands clutched around the arms of her seat. Her knuckles had gotten whiter with every suggestion and question posited by the travellers, and he could see her shoulders heaving with unsteady breaths.

But the professor’s tenacious insistence on denying the obvious broke through what little calm she had. She rounded on him with a snarl. “Well, evidently we have stopped, so there’s no point in denying it.”

Professor Hobbes slunk away until he was standing in front of his seat, his mouth hanging open as
he stared at Sky with wounded pride.

Jethro laughed. “We’ve broken down.”

“Thanks, Jethro,” his mum said sarcastically.

Getting under her skin was all the motivation Jethro needed to continue. “In the middle of nowhere.”

“That’s enough. Now stop it,” Biff ordered.

Anniqua walked down the middle aisle, interrupting the family argument before it could get worse. “Ladies and gentlemen, and variations thereupon. We’re just experiencing a short delay.”

The Doctor’s eyes narrowed as he took in the nervous energy vibrating off her. The screen that had been lowered earlier to play the cartoon was still down, and she reached for it and pulled until it retracted into the ceiling. Then she straightened her blazer, still trying to find an outlet for her obvious anxiety.

She smiled at them, but her dilated pupils made it obvious how upset she was. The driver needs to stabilise the engine feeds. It’s perfectly routine, so if you could just stay in your seats.”

The Doctor frowned; the tour vehicle ran on micropetrol engines, and micropetrol didn’t need to be stabilised. He felt Rose’s attention sharpen as his mood turned serious, and he walked to the cabin door, intent on asking the drivers for the real story.

“No, I’m sorry, sir,” Anniqua said, trying to stop him.

The Doctor ignored the rest of her sputtering and held up the psychic paper. “There you go. Engine expert. Two ticks.” He pushed the button that opened the door and stepped inside the cockpit, while Anniqua continued trying to call him back to his seat.

There were two seats, and the Doctor placed his elbows on their backs and leaned forward. An older white man looked back at him while a young black man kept fiddling with the controls, trying to get the vehicle to move again.

“Sorry,” said the man who’d turned around, and the Doctor recognised the voice of Driver Joe. “If you could return to your seat, sir.”

The Doctor held up the psychic paper again while he examined the engine readouts. “Company insurance. Let’s see if we can get an early assessment.” He slid the wallet back into his pocket and looked down at the driver. “So, what’s the problem, Driver Joe?”

“We’re stabilising the engine feeds,” Joe lied. “Won’t take long.”

“Um, no,” the Doctor contradicted, “because that’s the engine feed, that line there,” he said, pointing at the screen, “and it’s fine. And it’s a micropetrol engine, so stabilising doesn’t really make sense, does it?” Joe grimaced up at him, and the Doctor shrugged. “Sorry. I happen to know a lot about engines. I’m the Doctor, by the way.” He held out his hand, and Joe shook it reluctantly. “So, what’s actually wrong?”

Joe hesitated, but his counterpart did not. “We just stopped.” The younger man gestured at the instrument readouts around them. “Look, all systems fine, everything’s working, but we’re not moving.”

The Doctor frowned and pulled out the sonic screwdriver, but a quick scan confirmed what the
young man had told him. “Yeah, you’re right. No faults. And who are you?”

“Claude. I’m the mechanic. Trainee,” he added quickly, probably before Joe could humiliate him by correcting him.

“Nice to meet you,” the Doctor said as he put the sonic back in his pocket.

Joe pointed to a flashing light on the control panel. “I’ve sent a distress signal. They should dispatch a rescue truck, top speed.”

The Doctor sighed; there went his tour, but there was nothing for it, really. “How long till they get here?”

“About an hour.”

“Well, since we’re waiting, shall we take a look outside?” Joe’s jaw dropped, and the Doctor nodded at the screen blocking their view of the planet’s surface. “Just lift the screens a bit?”

Joe breathed hard, the fear pouring off him. “It’s a hundred percent Xtonic out there. We’d be vaporised.”

“Nah,” the Doctor said dismissively. “Those windows are Finitoglass—they’d give you a couple of minutes.” Joe glanced at the screen, then back at him, and the Doctor grinned. “Go on, live a little.”

Joe shook his head and laughed once, like he couldn’t believe what he was about to do. “Well.” Then he hit a button, and the screen went up quickly.

Bright white light filled the cockpit. “Wow,” Joe breathed.

The Doctor drank in the sight of a new planet. The thrill that coursed through him at the sight of the crystalline spires was even stronger than it usually was. This was a sight no living creature had ever seen.

“Oh, that is beautiful,” he murmured. The spires here were taller and more elaborate than the ones near the leisure palace. The formation directly in front of them reminded him of Lincoln Cathedral, with two towers rising high above a shorter structure.

“Look at all those diamonds,” Claude said, pointing to where the sunlight glinted off the surface. “Poisoned by the sun. No one can ever touch them.”

“Joe, you said we took a detour?” the Doctor asked, without looking away from the view.

“Just about forty kliks to the west.”

“Is that a recognised path?”

“No, it’s a new one,” Joe replied. “The computer worked it out on automatic.”

“So we’re the first,” the Doctor whispered. It felt like a sacred moment, too important for normal voices. “This piece of ground. No one’s ever been here before. Not in the whole of recorded history.”

The moment was broken when Claude moved quickly, pointing out at the planet. “Did you just?” He shook his head. “No, sorry, it’s nothing.”

But the Doctor wouldn’t let him second-guess himself. “What did you see?”
Claude pointed at the closest spire. “Just there. That ridge,” he said, wiggling his finger so the Doctor would look at the second level of the formation. “Like, like a shadow. Just, just for a second.”

“What sort of shadow?” *Maybe Jethro was right!*

An alarm started beeping before Claude could answer. “Xtonic rising.” Joe pressed a button, and the shield started coming down. “Shields down.”

“Look, look.” Claude pointed frantically at the sliver of landscape still visible. “There it is, there it is. Look, there.”

“Where?” The shield closed completely, and the Doctor looked at Claude. “What was it?”

Claude’s pupils were blown and he was breathing heavily. “Like just something shifting.” He finally looked away from the screen. “Something sort of dark, like it was running.”

“Running which way?” the Doctor pressed.


A frisson of excitement and fear went down the Doctor’s back.

“Right, Doctor, back to your seat,” Joe snapped. “And, er, not a word. Rescue’s on its way. If you could close the door. Thank you.”

The Doctor straightened up and left the cockpit. *My tour isn’t exactly going as planned,* he told Rose. *In fact, they’ve sent a rescue vehicle and we’ll be back at the resort in… oh, three hours?*

*Well, you broke your cardinal rule just before boarding,* she pointed out, a hint of cheek in her voice. *You asked what could possibly go wrong.*
The title is absolutely a pun.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Rose was on the massage table when she first felt the prickle under her skin. She turned her head to catch the massage therapist’s eye. “What kind of oil are you using?” she asked, wondering if it was something she was allergic to. The therapist showed her the bottle, and she didn’t see any ingredients she was sensitive to, so she handed it back with a nod.

But a few minutes later, the prickle had worsened, and having someone touch her felt like her skin was being rubbed by sandpaper. “I’m sorry,” she said regretfully, “but I think I need to end the session early.”

The therapist took her hands off Rose’s back, and Rose heard her step away from the table. “Is there something about my technique that isn’t agreeable to you?”

Rose shook her head; she’d finally recognised the source of her discomfort, and it wasn’t physical in nature. “No, not at all. And don’t worry—I’ll still pay you for the full sixty minutes.”

“Thank you, ma’am. I’ll leave so you can get dressed.”

The tag on her blouse scratched unpleasantly on the back of her neck, but thankfully, the rest of her clothes didn’t bother her. Rose left a tip in the jar—it wasn’t the therapist’s fault she suddenly had to bail out of her session.

Alone in the lobby, she focused on the sharp excitement with a hint of fear the Doctor was feeling. There was something unexpected going on on the tour bus.

She rubbed absently at her neck. And whatever it is, it’s got my time senses going haywire.

She tried not to hover over the Doctor, but as soon as he had a free moment, he focused on her. My tour isn’t exactly going as planned, he explained.

She sighed. Of course it bloody wasn’t.

In fact, they’ve sent a rescue vehicle and we’ll be back at the resort in… oh, three hours?

Well, you broke your cardinal rule just before boarding, she pointed out, hiding her disquiet behind cheek. You asked what could possibly go wrong.

The Doctor’s wry amusement cut off abruptly, and Rose got the impression that one of the passengers was badgering him with questions. Better let them know a rescue is on the way.

When he spoke to the person standing in front of him, Rose jumped up and started pacing. There was… time was… and the Doctor...

She blew out a loud breath and focused on the bond, paying enough attention that she could follow
the drift of the conversation going on around him. Time was swirling in eddies around him, and watching it from a distance was almost torturous.

“Mum?”

Rose jumped when Jenny rested a hand on her arm. “Don’t touch me,” she requested sharply.

Jenny, bless her, wasn’t hurt by her tone. Instead, she dropped her hands to her sides and looked at Rose. “You seemed upset,” she said, tapping her temple, “so I ended my massage and had someone get Donna.”

“You didn’t have to interrupt your own massages,” Rose protested, even though she was grateful not to be alone.

Donna came out as Rose was talking. “What’s the point in getting a massage when the world could be ending?” She untwisted her hair, letting it fall out of the bun into a long ponytail. “Though I have to ask, can’t we even go to a resort without running into trouble?”

Rose felt a smile creep across her face. “Apparently not,” she said with a sigh. She opened her mouth to tell Jenny and Donna what little she knew, then remembered she was in a full waiting room with staff hovering nearby. “I think there was a cafe up front—I could go for a cuppa right now.”

Donna snorted. “You could always go for a cuppa,” she said as they walked out of the salon.

“Yeah, well I really could today,” Rose countered.

When they were seated at the cafe, steaming cups of tea in hand, she took a breath and let it out slowly. “There’s something going wrong on the bus,” she said, careful to keep her voice quiet so the other guests couldn’t overhear. “It’s stopped, and they’ve called for a rescue vehicle, but… I’m worried.”

“What about?” Jenny asked.

Rose pressed her fingers to her temples, trying to find the words to explain the amorphous feeling of something lingering just out of reach of her time senses. “There’s just something…” She thought of the telepathic presence she’d felt earlier, and the way the timelines felt right now. “I just have a feeling something’s about to happen.”

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“What did they say? Did they tell you? What is it? What’s wrong?”

The Doctor blinked at Sky, taken aback by her barrage of questions. He hadn’t expected to be interrogated as soon as he returned to the main cabin, so he didn’t have a lie ready.

Before he could open his mouth to repeat Driver Joe’s lie about the engines stabilising, Rose whispered, Better let them know a rescue is on the way.

The Doctor frowned slightly; of course that made the most sense, despite Joe’s admonition to keep the truth from people. “I’m afraid the engines have stopped,” he said, choosing his words carefully. “But they’ve called for help—a rescue truck is on its way.”

Sky shook her head and wrapped her arms around her chest. “I don’t need this. I’m on a schedule. This is completely unnecessary.”
Anniqua glared at the Doctor and then looked pointedly at his empty seat. “Back to your seats, thank you.” Sky huffed and sat down, and the Doctor smiled at her, then took his own seat.

Unsurprisingly, Hobbes did not take this further deviation from the typical tour of Midnight well. “This is my fourteenth time taking this tour, and this has never happened!”

The Doctor shrugged. “Well, I suppose that means they were about due to have an incident of some sort,” he said reasonably. “The law of averages and all.” Hobbes pressed his lips into a thin line and settled back in his seat.

“Well how long are we going to have to sit here for?” Biff groused. “I didn’t pay for this tour to sit in a bus for hours on end.”

The door between the cabin and the cockpit slid open and Val waved Anniqua over. “If I’m going to sit here for another hour or more while we wait for this rescue vehicle to reach us, I expect my wine glass to be kept full.”

Anniqua’s back stiffened. “Of course, Mrs. Cane,” she replied, and the Doctor could hear the way she was gritting her teeth in her strained voice.

A moment later, the Hostess turned and glared straight at him. Ah. She knew Driver Joe asked me to lie. The Doctor shrugged unapologetically, and the woman spun on her heel and stalked into the galley.

“There you go,” the Doctor said, trying for a cheerful tone. “We’ll all have some wine, tell a few more stories, and be back at the resort in time for a late lunch. I can guarantee you everything’s fine.”

He didn’t even have time to regret breaking his rule again before something hit the bus, thumping twice against the hull.

“What was that?” Val demanded.

Professor Hobbes looked at the bus’ ceiling, then at Val. “It must be the metal. We’re cooling down. It’s just settling,” he said, but he was grasping at straws and they all knew it.

“Rocks,” Dee Dee suggested. “It could be rocks falling.”

Biff sat up in his seat, trying to make himself look larger and more intimidating than he really was. “Well I can tell you one thing for sure,” he growled in annoyance, “as soon as we get back to the Leisure Palace, I’ll be asking for a full refund!”

Two more thumps sounded on another part of the hull. Everyone jumped, and even Jethro dropped his disaffected attitude to pull his legs up into his seat.

Sky followed the progress of the thumps with her gaze. “What is that?” she asked, staring at the wall where the most recent ones had come from.

Val was staring at the spot, too. “There’s someone out there.”

“Now, don’t be ridiculous,” the professor scoffed.

Dee Dee licked her lips and tried to offer her very reasonable explanation for the second time. “Like I said, it could be rocks.”

“We’re out in the open,” the Hostess argued, gesturing to indicate the open space surrounding the
The Doctor winced. He was normally all for clearing up erroneous ideas, but in the current climate, he wouldn’t have been so swift to discard a possibility that might make people feel a little bit safer.

They heard two more thumps.

The Doctor looked at the wall of the bus. He could feel a twisted knot in the timelines getting closer, and despite the obvious danger, he was intrigued to find out what was coming.

“Knock, knock,” he murmured.

“Who’s there?” Jethro said, completing the second half of the ancient Earth joke.

An ominous beat seemed to vibrate through the bus, like a drum they could feel, but not see. The Doctor was aware of Rose’s tension as she focused on the bond, trying to catch as much of what was going on around him as she could, and he opened up to the bond a little bit more so she could hear the conversation in the bus.

“Is there something out there?” Sky’s voice went up an octave. “Well? Anyone?” Two more thumps sounded in answer to her demand, and her whole body quivered. “What the hell is making that noise?”

Professor Hobbes got to his feet and heaved an aggrieved sigh. “I’m sorry, but the light out there is Xtonic.”

The Doctor walked away from the professor as he gave his wholly unhelpful and frankly unbelievable reassurances. There was something out there, and he was determined to find out what it is, and ascertain if it carried any threat.

“That means it would destroy any living thing in a split second,” the professor continued. “It is impossible for someone to be outside.”

*And yet there is,* Rose countered. *Be careful, love.*

The Doctor nodded absently as he scanned the hull of ship with his eyes, trying to guess where the next thump would come from.

Sky gasped and glared at the professor, who kept insisting nothing could survive on Midnight.

“Well, what the hell is that, then?”

The Doctor reached into his pocket as he walked quickly to the part of ship where they’d heard the most recent thumps.

“Sir, you really should get back to your seat,” Anniqua hissed.

He ignored her, pulling out his stethoscope and pressing the bell to the interior wall, right next to a window. “Hello?” he asked, hoping for some kind of answer.

And he got one, in the form of two more thumps, coming now in a faster rhythm. He straightened and his gaze moved to the back of the ship, behind the galley, where the thumps had come from this time.

“It’s moving,” Jethro said, sounding a little less amused and a little more scared.

The emergency exit rattled, and while the Doctor wanted to chalk that up to a coincidence, he knew
that door was on heavy hydraulics. No amount of wind or pressure could make it move accidentally.

Val pointed at the door and stumbled back a few paces. “It’s trying the door.”

“There is no it,” Professor Hobbes insisted. “There’s nothing out there. Can’t be.”

The emergency door rattled a few more times, they they heard two thumps on the roof, followed by two more thumps on the main entrance.

Val whimpered in fear. She was closest to the door, and she jumped away from it and spun around. “That’s the entrance. Can it get in?” she cried, pointing at the door.

Dee Dee shook her head. “No. That door’s on two hundred weight hydraulics.”

“Stop it,” the professor ordered. “Don’t encourage them.”

“What do you think it is?” Dee Dee countered, finally sounding a bit exasperated with him and his narrow view of the universe.

Biff reached for the door, and Val grabbed his arm. “Biff, don’t.”

“Mr. Cane. Better not,” the Doctor advised, remembering Anniqua’s warning not to touch the seals around the doors.

Biff shook his head. “Nah, it’s cast iron, that door.” He knocked on the door three times, and immediately, three thumps came back.

Sky gasped in fear and backed away from the door. Even the professor seemed to be perspiring under the collar of his Oxford shirt, belying his calm insistence that nothing could be outside.

“Three times,” Val said, her voice getting shrill as she looked around at the group. “Did you hear that? It did it three times.”

“It answered,” Jethro said.

“It did it three times!” Val repeated.

The Doctor narrowed his eyes; he was honestly more concerned with the disproportionate fear rolling off his fellow passengers than whatever was outside. He pushed his way between Val and Biff to stand in front of the door, holding his hands up to placate the quickly unravelling group of humans.

“All right, all right, all right. Everyone calm down.”

Sky gestured to the door with shaking hands. “No, but it answered. It answered. Don’t tell me that thing’s not alive. It answered him.”

Whatever was outside pounded on the door three more times, drawing a few shrieks of fear from the humans shaking on the bus.

Any thoughts, Rose? the Doctor asked.

They’re spiralling, Doctor. I know you’re curious to know what’s out there, but those seven people standing around you are panicked, and you know how dangerous that is. Do whatever you can to calm them down.
Anniqua stepped forward and tried to restore order in a situation that was already beyond her control. “I really must insist you get back to your seats,” she shrieked.

“No, don’t just stand there telling us the rules,” Sky yelled. “You’re the Hostess. You’re supposed to do something.”

The Doctor looked at the two women, Sky red-faced and angry and Anniqua, shoulders heaving as she quivered in fear. Neither of their reactions were what he would have expected of them, and he filed that fact away as he stepped in between them.

“Sky,” the Doctor said, keeping his voice low and quiet. “Take a deep breath. I know it’s scary, but...”

Four loud thumps interrupted his reassurance, and Sky’s eyes were wild with fear. “What is it?” she moaned. “What the hell’s making that noise? She said she’d get me,” she added, and the Doctor suddenly understood how withdrawn the woman had been, and her terrible fear.

“Stop it. Make it stop. Somebody make it stop. Don’t just stand there looking at me. It’s not my fault. He started it with his stories,” she said, pointing to the professor, then her finger moved to the Doctor. “And he made it worse!” Her chest was heaving. “Why didn’t you leave it alone? Stop staring at me. Just tell me what the hell it is.”

Her words came faster and faster as she dissolved into a full-blown panic attack. The Doctor wanted to offer her some kind of comfort, but as the rest of the passengers watched Sky, they slowly advanced on her without realising it, and all he could do was stand in between them, hoping it made Sky feel moderately safe.

“Calm down!” Dee Dee moved her hands in a calming gesture, and it might have worked, if the thumping hadn’t started again, moving across the roof this time, towards the front of the bus.

“It’s coming for me. Oh, it’s coming for me,” Sky moaned, backing up as the thumps got closer and closer to her. “It’s coming for me. It’s coming for me. It’s coming for me.” Her back hit the cockpit door and she screamed.

Each thump was louder and harder than the one before, and the Doctor suddenly realised they might actually be able to beat their way through the hull. “Get out of there!” he shouted, reaching for Sky.

Before he could grab her and pull her away from the cockpit, one final massive impact sent the whole shuttle rocking from side to side. Sparks showered down on them as the electrical wiring was shredded, and then the bus went dark.

The longer the situation on the bus went on, the more Rose’s time sense grated at her. They were teetering on the edge of a “what must not be,” and the Doctor was right in the middle of it—not even tea could calm her.

The TARDIS hummed urgently in her mind, and Rose tapped nervously on the table.

“I know dear,” she thought, trying to sound as soothing as possible. But he can take care of himself.

Before the ship could respond, the Doctor’s tense demeanour erupted into full-blown fear and confusion. Rose pressed her hands to the table, barely restraining the urge to leap to her feet and run to the TARDIS.

“What is it, Rose?”
She took a deep breath and shook her head, trying to steady her nerves. “Things are getting worse,” she muttered. “Come on,” she said, pushing back from the table and jumping to her feet. The food had been billed to her room, so they didn’t need to worry about paying before they left. “It’s time we asked a few questions of management.”

Get information before making a choice. It was the right thing to do—it was looking before she leapt, like the Doctor always wanted her to do. But the urge to just go rescue him was hard to resist. She ground her teeth together, then reached out for her bond mate. If he were injured, she would skip the information gathering and go straight to the rescue she was already planning in the back of her mind.

*Doctor! Are you okay?*

She waited impatiently while he took a physical inventory. *Arms, legs, neck, head, nose. I’m fine, Rose. I promise.*

Rose sagged in relief and set off for the front desk. *Please be careful, love.* For once, the brush of reassurance the Doctor passed over the bond did not actually reassure her.

=oOoOoOoOo=

When the shaking finally stopped, the Doctor was on the floor, wedged in between two rows of seats. The bus was almost pitch dark, and it was only his superior vision that enabled him to see the shadowy figures of his fellow passengers slowly getting to their feet. And to add to the overall disorienting atmosphere, the power going out had rebooted the entertainment system and they were listening to the music video again.

*Doctor! Are you okay?*

Rose’s concern demanded his full attention, and an honest answer. He sat up gingerly, running his hand through his hair first to make sure he didn’t have any head injuries, then taking inventory of his limbs. *Arms, legs, neck, head, nose. I’m fine, Rose. I promise.*

*Please be careful, love.*

The Doctor sent her as much reassurance as he could manage as he got to his feet and looked around at his fellow passengers. “Everyone all right? How are we?”

“Earthquake,” Professor Hobbes grunted as he righted himself. “Must be.”

Dee Dee shook her head and rubbed her hands up and down her arms. “But that’s impossible. The ground is fixed. It’s solid.”

The Doctor nodded. Unlike most planets, Midnight’s surface was not comprised of tectonic plates that could shift against each other. Midnight didn’t have a core and a crust, either. It was solid diamond the whole way through, making an earthquake technically impossible.

“We’ve got torches,” Anniqua said, her voice winded. “Everyone take a torch. They’re in the back of the seats.”

They all obeyed, and a moment later, five narrow beams of light were bouncing around the cabin, some of them hitting the Doctor in the face.

Most of the passengers stayed in their seats, still trying to catch their breath. But as soon as there was a bit of light in the cabin, Jethro stepped into the aisle and strode towards the front of the bus.
“Oh, Jethro,” Val cooed. “Sweetheart, come here.”

“Never mind me.” Jethro leaned against a seat and shone his torch at the cockpit door. “What about her?”

They all followed his gaze to where he was pointing.

In the midst of the rubble of the front row of seats, Sky sat with her head in her hands. It was the same position she’d been cowering in a few minutes ago, only pushed into a seat instead of backed against the wall of the bus.

The Doctor took his own torch while Val and Biff commented on the state of the seats and wondered what had happened to them. He was more concerned with the woman sitting there than the upholstery, so he ignored their questions. The fact that he didn’t have any answers would only ignite the panic once again, anyway.

He knelt beside Sky and put a gentle hand on her back, not wanting to trigger any flashbacks to her abusive ex with a touch too sudden or heavy-handed. “It’s all right, it’s all right, it’s all right,” he whispered soothingly. “It’s over. We’re still alive. Look, the wall’s still intact. Do you see?” He nodded up at the cabin hull, which had large dent bulging inward, but maintained its integrity.

“We’re safe.”

“Driver Joe, can you hear me?” Anniqua cried over the intercom. A moment later she ran to the front of the cabin, fear practically vibrating in waves off her. “I’m not getting any response. The intercom must be down.”

She pressed the yellow button, and the cockpit door slid open. But instead of the dimly lit cockpit the Doctor had stood in just five minutes before, painfully bright light flooded the cabin. The Xtonic radiation alarm the Doctor had heard before sounded, and the Hostess managed to press the button again, getting the door to close before they were all vaporised by the rays of Midnight’s poisonous sun.

“What happened? What was that?” Val asked.

“Is it the driver?” Biff said. “Have we lost the driver?”

Anniqua staggered back from the door, her mouth hanging open in shock. “The cabin’s gone.”

That’s not possible, the Doctor thought as he used the sonic on the panel, but he didn’t voice it out loud. Too many impossible things had already happened today.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Professor Hobbes said, and the Doctor rolled his eyes. “It can’t be gone. How can it be gone?”

“Well, well, you saw it,” Dee Dee snapped.

With his back to the group, the Doctor was able to hide the smirk Dee Dee’s sass brought to his face. There we go—there’s the woman who’s going to find the Lost Moon of Poosh one day.

“There was nothing there,” Anniqua stammered, “like it was ripped away.”

Biff shone his torch in the Doctor’s direction. “What are you doing?”

“Ah, that’s better,” the Doctor said cheerily, as if Biff had meant to help. “Little bit of light. Thank you. Molto bene.”
Val sniffed. “Do you know what you’re doing?”

Her harshness made it hard to sympathise with her, but the Doctor could hear the fear beneath the strident tone. He reached into his pocket for the psychic paper, thinking quickly to come up with a single lie that might satisfy as many needs as possible—he couldn’t go flashing the paper around in front of multiple people and have it read something different each time.

It only took him a second to settle on a name and title, and he handed the wallet to Val. Biff sidled over to her and read over her shoulder. “Doctor John Tyler, PhD Xenobiology, Anthropology. Expert in alien races and cultures.”

The Doctor took the paper back from Val and put it away. “Plus, lots of applied skill in mechanics and electrical wiring,” he added. “The things you get into when you’re on an expedition… It’s best to know how to take care of yourself.”

He finally managed to get the panel loose, and what he saw confirmed what Anniqua had said. “I didn’t think it was possible,” he said, staring at the severed wires dangling from the panel. “Any rupture in the hull should have sealed itself off. But something sliced it off. You’re right, the cabin’s gone.”

“But if it gets separated?” Anniqua asked desperately.

The Doctor shook his head slowly. “It loses integrity,” he said, trying to be as gentle as possible. He stood up and looked back at the rest of the passengers and the Hostess. “I’m sorry, they’ve been reduced to dust.” Anniqua sobbed, and the Doctor remembered that Joe and Claude were her coworkers, people she might have known well. “I’m sorry,” he repeated, looking directly at her. “Joe and Claude are gone.”

The words landed in the small tour bus with the impact of a ticking time bomb. Five terrified humans stared back at him, and he realised immediately that he needed to say something, anything, to get their focus off the tragedy and onto the hope of their own survival.

“But remember, they sent a distress signal.” He stood up and willed everyone to trust him, to believe they would be fine. “Help is on its way. They saved our lives. We are going to get out of here, I promise. We’re still alive, and they are going to find us.”

When they reached the main lobby, Rose pushed the doors open. The concierge’s broad smile faltered slightly when she strode across the room and put her hands down on the desk.

“Excuse me, I was wondering about the tour to the waterfall.”

The woman’s expression shuttered, and Rose narrowed her eyes at her.

“My husband is on it, and I can’t remember when he said he’d be back.”

The concierge’s eyes darted down to the screen in front of her, and quick as a wink, Rose grabbed the tablet and read the message. She growled softly in displeasure when it didn’t tell her anything she didn’t already know: they’d been stopped, and a rescue vehicle was on its way to pick them up.

“How long until the rendezvous?” Rose asked curtly as she handed the tablet back.

“Sixty minutes,” the woman snapped. Then she took a deep breath and a moment later, her expression was serene again. “We’ll be giving an announcement over the tannoy when the rescue
vehicle returns to the docking bay. If you listen for that, you should be able to meet him upon his arrival.”

Rose wanted to snarl that she wouldn’t need an overhead announcement to let her know when the Doctor was close, but she swallowed the words. “Thank you,” she managed, then turned back to Jenny and Donna and motioned for them to leave the lobby.

Jenny and Donna exchanged a glance as they followed Rose through the resort in the direction of their rooms. Donna nodded from Jenny to Rose, then made a “come on” motion with her hand when Jenny was silent.

**Oh.** Jenny took a deep breath, then came up alongside her mother. “What now, Mum?”

Rose looked at her, then over her shoulder at Donna. “I told you the bus had stopped, but something just attacked them and managed to sever the cockpit from the rest of the vehicle.” She took a deep breath. “I know Midnight is supposedly uninhabited, but something is out there, and it’s already killed the driver and the mechanic.” She brushed a strand of hair back over her ear. “That’s why we’re going to get the TARDIS and go get them.”

Jenny could feel the fiercely protective instinct guiding her mum’s decisions. Rose’s eyes glittered gold for a moment, and Jenny almost took a step back.

“They’ve got a rescue vehicle going out there, don’t they?” Donna said.

Rose blinked, and the gold was gone. She shook her head quickly. “You heard the concierge—the rescue vehicle won’t get to them for another hour.” She pressed her lips into a thin line. “They don’t have that long. If we don’t get those people off of that bus soon, it will be too late.”

A hint of a premonition, just the feeling that something was lurking just out of sight, teased the edges of Jenny’s time senses. The utter wrongness of it made her shiver, and she met Rose’s gaze head-on.

“Let’s go.”

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The reminder of the coming rescue quieted the passengers. In the absence of six voices all talking over each other, they could hear how still things had become.

“That noise from outside,” Jethro whispered. “It’s stopped.”

“Well, thank God for that,” Val spat out.

He shook his head. “But what if it’s not outside anymore? What if it’s inside?”

Val’s eyes turned white with fear. “Inside? Where?”

“It was heading for her.” The beam from Jethro’s torch landed on Sky’s back. “Why won’t she turn around?”

Five more torches were directed at Sky, casting her silhouette on the wall of the bus. She remained hunched over, apparently unaware that she was the centre of attention.

The Doctor turned to Anniqua. “Have we got a medical kit?”

She took a shuddering breath and straightened her shoulders. “Yes, of course. I’ll go get it.” Her eyes were still wide with fear as she walked past him to the galley, but she looked more collected than she
had before the bus had stopped.

Sky still hadn’t moved, and the Doctor approached her carefully, as if she were a frightened animal. “Sky?” he asked once he reached her side. His voice was low and soft. “It’s all right, Sky. I just want you to turn around, face me.”

Sky’s right hand dropped, then her left. With the shadow on the wall copying her motions, the scene was eerily reminiscent of classic horror films. Judging from the increased respiration he could hear from the other passengers, the Doctor wasn’t the only one who’d noticed the similarity.

Her right shoulder moved towards them as Sky turned slowly, and even the Doctor found himself holding his breath. A moment later, she raised her face to look at them, and the beams from the torches became a makeshift spotlight, illuminating her sharp features.

Pale blue eyes looked at the Doctor first, then shifted rapidly from one passenger to another. Disquiet stirred in the Doctor’s mind when he watched the way her eyes moved. It wasn’t… as much as he hated to think it, it wasn’t human.

The Doctor shifted closer to her, and suddenly, those pale blue eyes were looking at him again. He tilted his head, and she mirrored him, tilting her head in the opposite direction so they were still eye to eye. In fact, she copied every move he made, refusing to let their eye contact break.

Feeling the tension in the group behind him, the Doctor drew a breath and focused on the woman in front of him. “Sky?”

“Sky?” Her voice sounded… hesitant, untrained, like she didn’t know how to form words and was learning as she went.

“Are you all right?” The Doctor leaned closer, giving her a quick once-over to see if she’d suffered any cuts or bruises.

“Are you all right?” she repeated, sounding a bit more like her old self now.

“Are you hurt?” he elaborated.

“Are you hurt?” Her voice was soft and child-like.

Thinking maybe she had a head injury so severe that she’d forgotten her own vocabulary, he said, “You don’t have to talk.”

“You don’t have to talk.”

“I’m trying to help,” the Doctor explained.

“I’m trying to help.”

The constant repetition was both putting him on edge and giving him a slight headache, so the Doctor said the one thing he didn’t think she would echo.

“My name’s the Doctor.”

“My name’s the Doctor.”

_Doctor!

Rose’s telepathic voice was so loud and shrill that the Doctor took a physical step backward. “Let’s
take a break for a moment,” he said for the benefit of everyone in the bus.

“Let’s take a break for a moment,” Mrs. Silvestry repeated.

The Doctor ignored her, focusing on Rose instead. What is it, Rose? He pressed a hand to his temple to massage away the ache.

Sorry. I didn’t mean…

He got the sense that she was running through a corridor, her arms pumping as she raced back to the TARDIS. But her elevated heart rate and respiration was a result of her fear, not her exertion.

I know you didn’t, love, he assured her. Now calm down, and tell me what’s wrong.

There was a brief pause, and when Rose spoke again, she felt noticeably less agitated. Be careful talking to Mrs. Silvestry.

The Doctor glanced at the woman. She hadn’t moved from her seat at the front of the bus. The other passengers were still talking to her, trying to get her to stop copying them. As Sky mimicked them all perfectly, a shiver of unease ran down the Doctor’s back.

Exactly, Rose said. There’s something… I felt another telepath on the planet before, while we were sunbathing. And I felt it again when the pounding on the bus started.

The Doctor thought about Rose’s suggestion as he looked at Sky. So far, everything she’d repeated had been simple words, ones that were already part of her vocabulary and knowledge base. But what would happen…

He stepped back into the group and Sky’s gaze immediately locked onto him. “The square root of pi is 1.772453850905516027298167483341. Wow.”

Sky copied him, just five or six digits behind him the whole time. When she echoed his “wow,” a glint of vicious amusement flickered in her eyes.

The Doctor rocked back on his heels, trying to put some distance between himself and Sky. Even without that fleeting glimpse of an alien personality, he would have known Rose was right. Sky had echoed his words faster than a human mind could have processed and repeated them, which meant there was a telepathic element to what was going on. The only way you could repeat someone so perfectly and so quickly was if you were actually in their head as they spoke.

“But that’s impossible,” Professor Hobbes said, using his favourite word again.

Dee Dee didn’t argue with him this time, though. “She couldn’t repeat all that.”

The Doctor stared at Sky, wondering if she was still alive in there somewhere, or if the alien had killed her when it had taken her over. “Tell you what,” he said, taking a step back. “I suggest we all stay quiet for a few minutes.” He stepped away from the centre of attention again, until he could discreetly scan the woman with his sonic screwdriver.

Instead of staying quiet, as he’d suggested, the rest of the passengers quickly filled the void his absence created. The Doctor clenched his jaw as he listened to the clamour of voices fill the bus while he finished his scans.

He’d just slid the sonic into his pocket when the lights on the bus came back. “That’s the back-up system,” Anniqua said—and Sky did not repeat.
Biff let out a loud gust of air. “Well, that’s a bit better,” he said, and it was unclear if he meant the sudden silence, or having the overhead lights back.

“What about the rescue?” Val lowered her torch and took a step towards Anniqua. “How long’s it going to take?”

“About sixty minutes, that’s all.” Anniqua smiled placidly at them as she walked down the aisle.

“Then I suggest we all calm down,” Professor Hobbes said, although his shuddering breaths certain didn’t give the impression of calm. “This panic isn’t helping. That poor woman is evidently in a state of self-induced hysteria. We should leave her alone.”

“Doctor,” Jethro said, and there was another voice there too, quiet and in the background.

The Doctor nodded, staring at Sky with wide eyes. “I know.”

Professor Hobbes frowned at him. “Doctor, now step back. I think you should leave her… alone…”

Only he wasn’t speaking alone. Sky was talking with him, in perfect time.

She was no longer copying. Now she was speaking in unison with every voice on the bus.

Chapter End Notes

So... things are going in a very different direction than canon... What do you think will happen next?
Halfway back to the TARDIS, Rose could once again feel the telepathic presence she’d noticed earlier. *That’s weird…* Her step faltered for a moment as it slid against her mind, then she understood what was happening and she started running.

It was testing the Doctor’s barriers, trying to get into his mind.

And it was picking up his words, echoing them through the mouth of another passenger.

Jenny and Donna hollered at her as they chased after her, but Rose ignored them. Instead, she hurled a frantic warning at the Doctor over the bond, unable to calm down until she knew he understood the danger he was in.

*What is it, Rose?*

A hint of a headache echoed over the bond, and Rose winced when she realised how loudly she’d yelled at him. *Sorry. I didn’t mean…* She wheeled around a corner, hoping to see the TARDIS, and cursed softly when she realised they were still five minutes away from the TARDIS, even at a run.

*I know you didn’t, love,* he assured her. *Now calm down, and tell me what’s wrong.*

She didn’t slow down, but she did manage to take a deep breath. *Be careful talking to Mrs. Silvestry,* she implored when she felt like she could talk over the bond without giving him a headache.

The Doctor focused back on the conversation swirling around the bus, and Rose shivered as Sky continued to echo every single sentence she heard. Comprehension dawned in the Doctor’s mind, and Rose wanted to cry, she was so relieved.

*Exactly,* she said. *There’s something… I felt another telepath on the planet before, while we were sunbathing. And I felt it again when the pounding on the bus started.* She could feel the Doctor’s acknowledgement and thanks, and then he turned his attention back to the passengers, and she kept running.

Donna and Jenny drew up alongside her. “What… is going on?” Donna panted.

“Figured out what I was afraid of happening,” Rose said shortly. “TARDIS, then explain.”

Rose drew a sigh of relief when she whipped around another corner and finally spotted the TARDIS, parked right where they’d left her. The door flew open before she could retrieve her key, and she breathed a word of thanks to the ship as she ran straight to the console.
Help me find him? she implored as ran her hands over the controls. The lights flashed in response.

Jenny and Donna were only a few steps behind her and shut the door once they were on board. Rose spared them a glance as she let the TARDIS guide her in setting the coordinates.

“There’s another telepath on Midnight somewhere,” she began. “I felt it earlier, when we were sunbathing.” Her hand landed on a dial and she twisted it until she felt the nudge to move on to the next control.

Jenny sucked in a breath. “I think I might have felt it, too. I just thought… it felt kind of like how you feel if you haven’t gotten enough sleep, a fuzzy feeling in my head.”

Rose paused and looked at her daughter. “I think what worries me the most is how skilled this telepath is at masking their presence from other telepaths. I only caught a hint of its existence by lucky chance, I think, and as soon as it realised it had been detected, it shut me out. You must have picked up on the same thing.”

She shook her head quickly and shifted down to the next panel and control. “But that’s not all. This thing, whatever it is, has taken over one of the passengers.”

Donna crossed her arms over her chest and sat on the edge of the jump seat. “What do you mean, it’s taken over a passenger?”

Rose ground her teeth together as she adjusted the sliding control that would lock onto the Doctor’s current temporal coordinates. The pressure on their telepathic barriers was getting worse, and for the first time, she worried that their combined barriers would not be enough to avoid an attack.

“Exactly what it sounds like, Donna,” Rose snapped. She pressed her lips together and took a breath. “Sorry. This is just… it feels so wrong.” She clenched and unclenched her fingers, trying to calm down. “Ever since the bus stopped, this woman has been… she’s been copying everyone, the way you would when you were a kid and you wanted to annoy the other kids on the playground?”

Donna nodded. “Bit creepy,” she admitted. “Especially if she hasn’t said anything that isn’t copying.”

“Exactly,” Rose agreed. “And I don’t think it’s going to stop there.”

The TARDIS stopped humming in Rose’s mind, and she stepped back to study the coordinates. As she did, she tuned in to her awareness of the Doctor’s location, trying to match up their landing with where it felt like he was. The bus was a small target, and with Midnight’s Xtonic sun, there was zero margin of error on this landing.

When she and the ship were both satisfied that everything was dialled in correctly, Rose took a deep breath and pulled the dematerialisation lever. The panic on the bus was building in time with the up and down churn of the time rotor, and she hoped they would get there in time.

The Doctor could feel it now, the other telepath Rose had sensed before. Now that he knew what to look for, it was obvious. He could feel the insidious presence, testing his telepathic barriers, trying to get in. Rose had been absolutely right. He was in far more danger than he’d realised.

Standing on the edge of the group, he took a moment to shore up those barriers, protecting both himself and Rose as much as possible. He felt Rose doing the same thing on her end, and gave her a quick hug as they finished.
The sonic screwdriver beeped, and he remembered he’d scanned Sky just a few minutes ago. A quick glance at the results told him what he needed to know. There were two sets of brain waves coming from Sky. One was human, but dormant, the pattern similar to delta wave sleep, but deeper.

The other set of brain waves was not human at all, and they were very active. Whatever it belonged to had taken over the body of Sky Silvestry.

Loud voices pulled his attention away from the sonic, and he looked back at the crowd of humans. Malicious pleasure glinted in Sky’s pale blue eyes as the panic escalated once more, and he suddenly realised the entity was stirring people up on purpose.

*And when did it start?* he wondered. *Driver Joe ordering me not to tell people a rescue was on the way? Professor Hobbes suddenly denying there could be life on Midnight when he’d just agreed with Jethro’s suggestion that there might be?*

“How can she do that? She’s got my voice! She’s got my words!”

Val’s shrill voice brought the Doctor back to the present. Timelines were shifting, and if he didn’t step in, they would be pushed towards a what-must-not-be. The entity possessing Sky could not be allowed to reach the Leisure Palace.

The Doctor stepped back into the group as Biff tried to get his wife to calm down. The big man paused after a moment and stared at Sky.

“She’s doing it to me.”

The Doctor held his hands up. “I think you should all be very, very quiet. Have you got that?” Sky spoke along with him, and fearful gazes flickered from her and back to him. He shook his head. “Ignore her. Listen to me. Take a deep breath, calm down, and be quiet.”

He looked directly at each person in turn, starting with Dee Dee. When she nodded, he moved on to Professor Hobbes, then Anniqua, Jethro, and Biff, looking at Val last.

Val’s gaze kept shifting from him to Sky, and the Doctor moved to block her view of the other woman. “Val.”

Finally, she nodded.

“Thank you.”

The Doctor felt the TARDIS shift into the Vortex, and he sighed softly, relieved to know help was on the way. Then he turned back to the possessed woman. There was a glint in her eyes, and he knew things were not going according to the entity’s plan.

*Good.* Rose’s approval would have pulled a chuckle from him, if it wasn’t followed by a sharp prodding at their telepathic barriers.

He tamped down his own anger and knelt so he was at eye level with Sky. “Now then, Sky.” He narrowed his eyes and shook his head. “Oh, but you aren’t Sky, are you? She’s still in there, but I’m talking to the thing possessing her.”

He felt the compulsion to rattle off a series of complicated words and nonsense, the sort of thing that would be impossible to repeat without telepathy. But he pressed his lips together, refusing to speak, even when his headache got worse. That was what the entity that wanted him to do, and what the entity wanted, it would not get.
Rose moved to meet the entity at the point where it was attempting to break through their barriers. The Doctor was torn between pride in her ability as she protected them both, and the instinct to pull her to safety. Reluctantly, he acknowledged that if their minds were breached, none of them would be safe, and he turned his attention back to the woman sitting in front of him.

He stood up slowly and shoved his hands into his pockets. “First it repeats, then it catches up,” he muttered as he stared down at Sky. “What’s the next stage?”

“Next stage of what?” Dee Dee asked warily.

There was a challenging note in the Sky surround sound as the entity spoke along with Dee Dee, and Sky’s head tilted just a bit as she looked at the Doctor, asking if he really understood what was going on.

Jethro looked from Sky to the Doctor. “That’s not her, is it.” It was a statement, not a question. Jethro knew. “That’s not Mrs. Silvestry any more.”

The Doctor shook his head, then grimaced as that sent a bolt of pain through his temple, reminding him that the entity was still trying to get into his mind.

“Mrs. Silvestry has been possessed by a telepathic entity,” he explained. “She’s still in there, but she’s not driving at the moment, so to speak. But if I could get her back to my lab, I have the means to separate them and restore Sky.”

The entity spoke along with him during his entire explanation. An edge entered Sky’s voice as she echoed his plan for its defeat, and a shiver went down the Doctor’s back at the sound.

“Doctor, make her stop.”

The Doctor nodded, feeling completely sympathetic with Val’s agitation. The pressure on his barriers was getting worse, and like Rose, he began to wonder if they could hold out long enough to eradicate the malignant entity from Sky Silvestry.

He put a hand on Val’s shoulder and gently directed her towards the opposite end of the bus, motioning for the other passengers to follow with them.


“Doctor, what is going on here?” Professor Hobbes demanded as he followed them down the aisle. “Telepathic possession is hardly a valid answer.”

The Doctor glanced back at the surly man. “Professor, I’ll allow that you’re the expert on Midnight, but unless you are a telepath, my knowledge of telepathy greatly outweighs your own.” That shut the man up, and they proceeded to the back of the bus without further protest.

When they were finally huddled together near the galley, he gestured for them to lean in and spoke in a low voice. “Look, my wife and I own… a teleport device,” he improvised. Sky was still speaking along with him, but since she’d remained at the front of the bus by the cockpit, the sound was muted. “And she’s getting it ready to lock onto us so we can get out of here as soon as possible—much faster than the rescue vehicle could get here. We only have to hold it together for...” He pressed his tongue to the back of his teeth and queried the TARDIS. “Maybe five more minutes. Then we’ll be on our way back to the resort. We can handle five more minutes, can’t we?”
He looked at the six humans he’d gotten to know today. Anniqua wrapped her arms around her waist, but nodded once, firmly. Professor Hobbes looked befuddled by everything that had gone on, but he finally didn’t argue. Dee Dee returned the Doctor’s smile, and Jethro looked determined.

The Doctor looked at Val and Biff. “Five minutes?”

But that wasn’t his voice.

Rose put her hands on the console and pushed, as if she could get the TARDIS to move faster. The ship seemed to be taking forever to fly the short distance between the resort and the bus, and meanwhile, she could feel the entity moving around their telepathic barriers, testing them, looking for a weak spot. Like a shark circling the waters, she thought bitterly.

Timelines swirled around her, and Rose growled in frustration. She moved her hands to her temples and tried to massage away the headache. It felt like something beating against her skull, and Rose pushed back as hard as she could. If the entity got in… if it managed to escape the bus…

She shuddered. The Doctor had a plan to restore Sky, but the thing inside the other woman’s mind had no intention of letting go that easily. A flood of anger washed over Rose, and she staggered back until she slumped against the jump seat.

“Mum?”

“Not now, Jenny.” Rose bent over with her head in her hands and her elbows propped up on her knees. She heard footsteps shuffle over the grating and then whispers as Jenny and Donna talked, then she turned her entire focus inward.

The Doctor was separating the other passengers from Sky, trying to keep them calm and keep the entity from taking any more control. But with each step he took, Rose’s headache got worse as the entity lashed out at them.

She cheered softly when he finally shut Professor Hobbes up, but her amusement didn’t last. A moment later, pain exploded behind her eyes, and then she knew no more.

The Doctor shuddered against the dual waves of pain—his own and Rose’s—as the entity took over. He had never felt a telepathic attack as swift and brutal. One moment he and Rose were successfully keeping the entity at bay, and the next, they had been subsumed by it.

His lips moved, forming the words just a split second after Sky. “Five minutes?”

On the other end of the bus, Sky stood up and sauntered down the aisle towards him. “Oh, look at that,” she purred. “I’m ahead of you.”

Sky smirked, and the Doctor was forced to repeat the mocking words. “Oh, look at that. I’m ahead of you.”

Even though he was frozen in place, the Doctor could see the other passengers out of the corner of his eye. They shifted away from him, until their backs were against the side of the bus. Nervous gazes darted between him and Sky.

“Doctor, what’s happening?” Anniqua asked.
The Doctor tried to move his lips, tried to answer the question and explain that the entity had stolen his ability to think independently. His body shuddered with the effort, but he was a hostage in his own mind, unable to do anything but look at Sky and the smug expression of the telepathic entity who had taken her over.

Sky stopped a few feet away from the Doctor. “You know, don’t you, Doctor? You were too clever, that’s why I had to take your voice.”

In the first moments the entity had been copying them, the passengers had been talking so quickly out of fear that their own words had almost covered up the sounds of Sky’s voice repeating them.

But now that the entity had full autonomy over Sky’s voice, it spoke slowly and methodically, leaving a pause after every phrase so the Doctor’s voice rang clearly through the bus. It didn’t want anyone to forget that he was being forced to repeat it.

He ground his teeth together, but couldn’t stop his lips from moving. “That’s why I had to take your voice.”

Sky put her hand on his chest and pushed, and the Doctor swayed back and forth on his feet. “I’m in control now.”

Malicious laughter danced in her eyes when the Doctor echoed that line, when he had clearly never been less in control.

“And when the bus comes, it will take me to the Leisure Palace.”

Behind Sky, Dee Dee shook her head. “But the Doctor said his wife is coming,” she protested, speaking over the Doctor’s voice.

Sky tilted her head back, her mocking grin firmly in place. In his mind, the Doctor could feel her tighten her hold on Rose’s consciousness, but he couldn’t gasp in pain in response.

“Tell them, Doctor.”

“Tell them, Doctor.” A tear rolled down his face, the body’s natural response to pain not muted by the entity’s presence.

“Tell them what I did to your wife.”

“Tell them what I did to your wife.”

He tried to reach for Rose over the bond, but even his mental capacity was leashed, held firmly in the entity’s control.

“How I’ve trapped her in her own mind.”

“How I’ve trapped her in her own mind.”

His words were devoid of emotion, despite the Doctor’s impotent rage. He wanted to snarl at the entity, to lash out, to hurl all the invectives in his head as he eviscerated the creature responsible for Rose’s pain… But instead, he was reduced to simply repeating the truth, in a flat voice lacking any affect.

The frightened passengers shifted until they were huddled together, and Sky stood tall over them, the entity gloating in its presumed victory.
“Why are you doing this?” Anniqua asked. “You killed Joe and Claude. Why?”

“I waited so long. In the dark. And the cold. And the diamonds. Until you came. Bodies so hot. With blood. And pain.”

As the Doctor echoed the words, he could feel the entity’s delight in playing with the emotions of the humans, and its smug complaisance in its belief that it had removed the one person who could contain it.

Because the entity didn’t want to be contained. It wanted to be loose. The full truth became clear to him, even as he was forced to repeat the explanation as if he were talking about himself. The entity had recognised in the bus a way out, a way to get off this planet. It had caused the vehicle to fail, and then it had attacked.

“Why are you telling us this?” Dee Dee asked. “You can’t think we’ll help you if we know what you’re doing.”

The entity tilted Sky’s head back and looked down her narrow nose at Dee Dee. “I can get inside your head,” it hissed softly. The Doctor repeated the words, then it continued. “Make you think things. Make you… do things.”

Val whimpered, and the entity half turned to look at her. “I killed the driver. And the mechanic. And now I want you.”

oOoOoOoOo

Donna helped Jenny recline Rose on the jump seat, then she stepped back and stared at her friend. “What happened, Jenny?”

Jenny took a shuddering breath. “The... the thing, it’s got them both,” she whispered. “They’re both still in my head, but they don’t feel right anymore. And I don’t know how to help.”

Donna spun around and looked at the younger woman. “Don’t you dare, Jenny Tyler,” she ordered. “I know you want your parents back—you know I do too—but you saw what happened to Rose when she tried to go head to head with that thing.”

She shuddered; watching Rose seize had been terrifying, but this unnatural stillness was worse. She shook her head and looked Jenny in the eye.

“Don’t do it.”

Jenny sniffed back tears. “But what am I going to do if they never come back?”

“They will,” Donna said with a bravado she didn’t feel. “They’re the Doctor and Rose Tyler. They always make it.”

Jenny took Rose’s hand. “Mum’s hurt worse than Dad, I think. And... They’re the Doctor and Rose Tyler, or Dad and Mum. If Mum doesn’t wake up, it’ll just be Dad, and I can’t...”

The possibility was just as unthinkable to Donna, and she grabbed Jenny by the shoulder and forced her to turn away from the prone figure of her mother.

“You listen to me, Jenny Tyler.” Jenny blinked, and the tears trickling down her cheeks stopped. “You’re forgetting two very important things. First of all, this is Rose we’re talking about here. She’s tough—really tough. I can’t imagine a measly telepathic attack could really stop her.”
“What’s the other thing, Donna?” Jenny begged. Because not even Rose was invincible, and they both knew it.

But Donna had an answer ready. “They’re the Doctor and Rose Tyler, like you said. If Rose can’t heal herself, there is no way your dad will let her go. As long as there’s the tiniest chance that she’ll wake up again, he will scour the universe, looking for a way to bring her back.”

They stood together in silence for a few moments, then Donna realised she could still hear the sound of the TARDIS in flight. She turned around and looked at the time rotor, still moving even though her pilot had passed out.

“She wants to get Dad,” Jenny said, answering the unspoken question. “She won’t stop.”

Landing on a bus with some kind of telepathic monster didn’t seem like a good idea to Donna, but on the other hand, neither did leaving the Doctor trapped there. The ship lights flashed once, in agreement Donna supposed, and then they landed.

Jenny reached for her hand, and Donna squeezed it tight. “What do we do now?” she muttered.

The door flew open before Jenny could answer, and a blonde woman ran into the TARDIS. Even if she hadn’t been a complete stranger, Donna would have known she was the person possessed by the telepathic entity. There was a glint of madness, of malice, in the woman’s blue eyes that gave her away.

“At last,” the woman murmured as she placed her hands on the console. “Free of Midnight, free of the cold… You will take me anywhere I want to go.”

Donna opened her mouth to argue with that, but before she could, a panel beneath the console flew open and gold light poured out of it.

The Doctor tried to stop the words, but he couldn’t. “I killed the driver. And the mechanic. And now I want you.”

Professor Hobbes looked at him, then at Sky. “I don’t understand. Who is saying that?”

It was the question the Doctor had feared from the moment he’d felt the entity take over his mind. In only five minutes, the entity had succeeded in confusing the other passengers, making them doubt what they knew to be true. With another forty-five minutes to go until the rescue vehicle arrived, it would turn them against each other, and him.

Five minutes… Hope blossomed in the Doctor’s mind as he felt another telepathic connection deepen—one he was very familiar with. He strained his ears, and a moment later, the wheezing of the TARDIS engines filled the bus.

“Where the hell did that come from?” Biff asked as the blue box materialised near the cockpit door.

Sky walked slowly towards the ship. “It’s called the TARDIS. Time and relative dimension in space,” she said, and the Doctor repeated his own oft-used explanation. “It can go anywhere… it can take me anywhere.”

She put her hand on the door, and the Doctor was unsurprised when his ship let her in. As entwined as the entity was with Sky now, there was only one way to eradicate the parasite and restore the human woman.
He waited with bated breath, listening and repeating Sky’s words as she laid out her plans. “Free of Midnight, free of the cold. You will take me anywhere I want to go.”

And then it happened. Gold light flared behind the windows as the heart of the TARDIS opened. The other passengers gasped in surprise, and the Doctor was thankful they all seemed to instinctively shield their eyes from the bright light.

The vice grip on his mind finally released its hold, and the light in the ship faded. The Doctor swayed on his feet and grabbed the back of the nearest seat to keep from collapsing onto the floor.

“It’s gone. It’s gone,” he panted, repeating the words over and over as he struggled to stay standing. His head was pounding, but his mind belonged to him again. He could take paracetamol for the pain.

Rose’s mind was still against his, as quiet as it would be if she were asleep. The Doctor started to reach for her, but the sound of muffled sobbing reminded him that there were still human passengers watching in fear.

He straightened and stepped out into the aisle, then walked slowly towards the TARDIS. Just inside the door, he turned around and looked back at Anniqua, Dee Dee, Professor Hobbes, Jethro, Biff, and Val.

“Come with me,” he offered, his voice quiet.

The six humans looked at each other for a long moment, shifting their weight as they considered. Dee Dee was the first to take a step forwards, and Professor Hobbes grabbed her elbow.

“You can’t go with him,” he hissed. “That… that thing has him.”

Dee Dee shook his off and glared at him. “The voice was the thing,” she said clearly. “And if the Doctor is speaking on his own now, then the thing is gone.”

“Very good, Dee Dee,” the Doctor praised. “Anyone else? I suppose the rescue vehicle will be here in… oh, about forty-five minutes, give or take. I can’t say I’d be interested in staying on this bus for that long, but…” He shrugged. “To each their own.”

He turned and walked around the console until he could crouch down by Rose’s side. His hand trembled when he brushed his knuckles over her cheek, and a band tightened around his chest when she didn’t lean into the caress.

“She hasn’t moved, Dad.”

The Doctor tore his gaze away from Rose to look at Jenny. “I know,” he mumbled as he stood up. In a reverse of how he’d felt only a few minutes ago, he was in complete control of his body and mind, but couldn’t feel anything.

The TARDIS hummed, and he nodded once in agreement. Rose would recover faster if he could get her to the zero room. That’s what it was there for, after all.

Jenny tried to reach out for a hug, but the Doctor shied away from the contact. “Not yet.” If he let himself have the comfort of a hug now, he would break down, and if he did that, he would lose precious time that should be spent taking care of Rose. “Let’s get back to the resort, then tend to your mother, then we can hug.” She nodded, and he turned to the console.

The subdued group of humans shuffled slowly into the ship as he set the coordinates. “Yes, it’s bigger on the inside,” the Doctor said tiredly, cutting off the remarks he typically enjoyed. “And it’s
not exactly a teleport… though it does disappear in one place and reappear in another, which is almost the same as teleporting.”

He pulled the dematerialisation lever, and the ship rocked gently into motion. His passengers were too shocked to respond, just clinging to each other and the railing as the TARDIS took them back to the resort.

A groan caught everyone’s attention, and the Doctor finally looked in the one spot he had been avoiding since he’d stepped back into his ship. The crumpled form of Sky Silvestry lay on the grating, directly in front of the console.

She slowly pushed herself upright, grabbing at her head as she got onto her knees. “What happened?” she mumbled.

“It’s still alive!” Val shrieked. “Get it out of here! Doctor!”

Part of the Doctor wanted to lash out at Sky, to get some kind of retribution for what had happened to himself and Rose. But when he looked into her eyes, he only saw a confused human woman.

Still, he pulled out his sonic screwdriver and scanned her. “I think we’ll find that this is just Sky,” he told Val as he turned on the monitor on the console.

A moment later, the scan was complete. Per his request, both results were brought up on the monitor, side by side. “Yes, look,” the Doctor said, pointing to the differences. “This is how I knew Sky had been possessed,” he explained, directing their attention to the two consciousnesses in the first scan. “And see here?” He moved to the second scan. “Just one, human mind.”

Sky leaned against the railing and put a hand to her temple. “It was so cold—that thing, I mean,” she said, stammering a bit. “I thought… I’ve felt hatred before, but never like that.”

“I just have one more question,” Jethro said. “Was that the only one, or are there more of them out there?”

The Doctor and Sky exchanged a long look. There was a loneliness about the entity, but not the same level of alone he was familiar with, in being the last of his kind. He saw the same answer in Sky’s eyes, but neither of them were willing to put it into words.

Donna read the answer on their faces and nodded sharply. “Right then,” she said. “Someone better talk to management, get this place shut down.”

The TARDIS landed, and the Doctor grabbed the console to stay standing while others tumbled to the grating. “You’re right, Donna,” he agreed. “They can build their Leisure Palace somewhere else.”

“I’ll talk to them,” Sky said suddenly. “If anyone can make them understand, it’s me.”

“We’ll all talk to them,” Biff said as he dusted himself off.

The Doctor looked around at the group, raising an eyebrow when he saw the same determined expression on every face. “All right then.” He gestured at the door. “If I did this right, you should be in the middle of reception. I think they’re waiting for you.”

Anniqua looked at the door, then at him, then she shrugged and pulled the door open. Another timeline shimmered at the edge of the Doctor’s awareness, one where she had died and his fellow passengers had shown him the darkest side of humanity.
I guess it really can always be worse, the Doctor mused as Dee Dee left the TARDIS and pulled the door shut behind her.

Once they were alone, the Doctor sprang into action. “Jenny, can you take us into the Vortex?” He carefully scooped Rose up into his arms. “I’m going to take Rose to the zero room so her mind can rest.”

He realised as he said it that neither Jenny nor Donna knew what the zero room was. Thankfully, they both knew now was not the time to stall him with questions they could ask later.

The TARDIS moved the zero room to the front of the main corridor, and the Doctor thanked her before pushing the door open and stepping inside.

The headache between his eyes faded as soon as the door closed behind him. At the same time, he heard a soft sigh of relief from Rose. It was the first reaction she’d shown to any stimulus, and he knew bringing her here had been the right choice. Both of their minds had been taxed by the entity’s attack, and they needed rest.

In fact…

The Doctor eyed the long, wide couch situated against the wall. Every muscle in his body was screaming at him to sit down, and for once, he didn’t feel like protesting that Time Lords don’t need rest.

“Let’s just lie down for a bit,” he murmured to Rose as he carried her over to the couch. He set her down and took a moment to remove his shoes, then stretched them both out and draped a soft blanket over them. “I’ll be right here when you wake up,” he whispered as he spooned her.

Rose was aware of two things when she woke up. First, the excruciating pain in her head had mostly faded to a dull headache. And second, the Doctor wasn’t there.

Before she could panic, she felt the familiar length of his body stretched out beside hers. He was there physically, even if she couldn’t feel him in her mind.

A moment later, she realised the hum from the TARDIS was gone too, and the pieces clicked. The zero room.

“Are you awake?” the Doctor asked. She felt his nose brush against her hair and knew he was shaking his head. “Can I tell you how strange it is to have to ask that question?”

Rose rolled over so she could see his face. “Believe me, I know,” she agreed. “So… it’s gone?”

The Doctor’s eyes shuttered, and even though she knew what he was thinking, there was a strange disconnect without being able to feel his anger and fear and the revulsion at being invaded in that way.

“It’s gone,” he said shortly.

Rose nodded, then she yawned as another wave of weariness washed over her. She tried to get comfortable on the couch, but being cut off from the Doctor telepathically felt wrong.

She pushed herself up until she was sitting. “Why the zero room?”
“Because the attack strained both of our minds,” the Doctor explained as he pulled his shoes back on. “Our telepathic centres specifically. We needed to rest, but if you’re ready, we can go back to our room now.”

Rose took his hand when he held it out and let him pull her to her feet. “Please.”

But as soon as they stepped into the hallway, Rose realised what a sanctuary the zero room had been. Her empty mind was suddenly full of the TARDIS and Jenny and the Doctor, and the inflamed neural pathways flared under the tension.

She put a hand to her temple and tried to hold back a whimper, but it escaped despite her pursed lips. *Of course, the Doctor already knew,* she reminded herself. He’d stopped and wrapped a supportive arm around her waist before she made a noise.

“All right, love?” he whispered, and her aching head thanked him for being so quiet.

The TARDIS dimmed the lights and pulled back from their connection as much as possible, and Rose sighed in relief. “Yeah. But maybe you could give me something for the headache when we get to our room?” She leaned against his chest. “And maybe we could stay home for a few days.”

The Doctor shifted his hold on her, and Rose wasn’t surprised when he carefully swept her up into his arms. “I definitely have something for your head, and I won’t argue with a chance to take care of you for a few days.”

Chapter End Notes

If you read the first version of this and wonder why I changed the conclusion, there are two reasons. First, the fight was out of character--they’ve really moved past the days of the Doctor being that overprotective every time Rose is hurt, and honestly... Rose should have been more upset about the dreams herself.

And the dreams. The dreams are the other reason. They seriously messed with my plans for Turn Left. And I only wrote the dreams in so they would have a reason for the fight that I just said was out of character.

So, instead there's soft hurt/comfort, and the next chapter will be (as planned) a gentle, romantic chapter with just them.
After a few days of recuperating, the urge to see new places struck Rose again. “You know,” she
told the Doctor over breakfast, “we never got to go on our date like we planned.”

“We didn’t, did we?” He leaned back in his chair and stared up at the ceiling. “Hmmm… Where
should we go?”

Rose glanced at Donna and Jenny, both sitting on the edge of their seats. “Why don’t you pick a fun
alien city? You and I can explore together, while Donna and Jenny go off by themselves?”

“Please, Dad?” Jenny chimed in. “I need to see the sky above my head.”

The Doctor’s chair rocked back onto the floor with a thud, and by the look on his face, Rose knew it
hadn’t occurred to him that their enforced rest time might be difficult for their companions. She knew
she’d needed the time to rest, and she knew neither of them resented her for that, but it was time for
all of them to step outside again.

He tugged on his ear. “All right. I think I know of just the place. Julata—plenty of shopping, good
food, excellent people watching…”

It was winter when they landed on Julata, and Rose, Jenny, and Donna all pulled on warm coats and
scarves before leaving the TARDIS. The Doctor had parked them in an alleyway, and Jenny darted
out to the street while Rose locked the door behind them.

“This is perfect!” she said when they joined her. “Look, it’s snowed recently!” The pavement had
been cleared of snow, but the park across the street still had swaths of pristine snow blanketing the
ground.

Rose took the Doctor’s hand. “All right, you two have fun. Text me if you get into any trouble, but
otherwise, we’ll plan to meet back here in time to get dinner together tonight.” Jenny and Donna
waved them off, then set out down the street.

When they were gone, Rose smiled up at the Doctor. “All right, time to impress me, Time Lord. Tell
me about Julata.”

The Doctor grinned down at her and swung their hands between them. “Welllll…” he drawled,
before kicking off a lecture on the planet and its culture that fascinated Rose.

They’d wandered the city for close to an hour when they stumbled across a shop specialising in
Christmas decorations. “Oh, let’s go in!” Rose said, tugging on the Doctor’s arm. “I know it’s
months away yet, but I want to have ornaments for Jenny and Donna—they’re part of our family
now.” The Doctor smiled and pressed a quick kiss to her lips, and they entered the shop.

Rose was scanning one of the dozens of Christmas trees laden with ornaments when she felt the
funny echo in her mind that heralded the appearance of another Doctor. She squeezed her Doctor’s hand, but before she could say anything, they heard a deep voice in a Scottish brogue.

“You know, when I came here to find a Christmas present for my bond mate, I didn’t expect to find… my bond mate.”

Rose’s eyes widened at the implication—they’d never met an older Doctor before. She and the pinstriped Doctor turned around and they both sucked in a breath when they saw a familiar face—one that had not belonged to the Doctor the last time they’d seen it.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” he demanded irritably, his impressive eyebrows drawn tight. A moment later, his expression smoothed out, and he nodded. “Ah. Yes. Caecilius.” He looked at his younger self. “There’s a reason you’ll choose this face, Doctor.”

Rose didn’t care about the reasons behind his appearance, though. She was more concerned with the moody anxiety she could feel from him. His blue eyes were slightly dull instead of showing the brightness she instinctively knew they were capable of, and there was a permanent line in his forehead that spoke of frequent frowning.

“Looking for a present for me, you said?” She gave him the cheeky smile he loved. “I might be able to help you with that.”

“Rose…”

The hand holding hers tightened, and Rose recognised the deep aversion her Doctor felt to letting her out of his sight. She turned and brushed her fingertips over his jaw. “But you won’t be letting me out of your sight,” she said reasonably. “I’ll be with you the whole time.”

He sighed, but nodded his head. “All right.” He looked at his older self. “One hour,” he said sternly. “You remember where we parked?”

“Even if he doesn’t, I do,” Rose interjected, raising her eyebrow at her Doctor.

“Right. Of course.” He sighed and tugged on his ear, then pulled her close for a hug. “I’ll see you in an hour,” he murmured.

The older Doctor’s smile had already brightened by the time they left the shop. “This is just after Midnight, isn’t it, Rose?” he asked.

Rose nodded and reached automatically for his hand. It was larger than her Doctor’s, and maybe just a little bit rougher, but there was the same instantaneous connection when their hands were clasped together, palm to palm.

The Doctor sighed. “You have no idea how hard it was for me to let you out of my sight.”

Rose rolled her eyes. “Bit ridiculous, the way you get jealous of yourself.”

To her surprise, the Doctor stopped and looked at her, his thick eyebrows drawn into a straight line. “That was not jealousy, Rose. I thought I’d told you…” He rubbed at his jaw and stared off in the distance. “No, I guess I haven’t yet.”

A glimmer of concern hit Rose, and she tugged on the Doctor’s hand so he would look at her again. “What haven’t you told me?”

He opened and closed his mouth a few times before shaking his head. “Tonight when you get home,
you need to ask me about Midnight.” He shrugged ruefully. “I’d tell you, but you need to hear it from him-me, not me-me. Or rather, he needs to be the one to tell you.”

Rose nodded slowly. They hadn’t really talked about Midnight at all, save taking care of her lingering headaches. She should have known the Doctor wasn’t as fine as he’d been pretending.

The Doctor squeezed her hand and his expression softened. “So, I was going to say no when you asked to go with me, but then you turned those reassuring, pleading eyes on me, and I couldn’t deny you.” He reached up and brushed his knuckles over her cheek. “I’d forgotten how besotted I was back then.”

Rose looked up at the Doctor, her eyebrow raised. “Are you saying you’re not anymore?” she challenged. She knew he still loved her—it burned brightly over the bond.

The Doctor stopped and brought her fingers to his lips. “Oh, Rose Tyler… Besotted doesn’t even begin to cover how I feel for you now.”

Rose let those words resonate through her, exciting her for the years of love yet to come.

They stopped in front of a cafe, and the Doctor bounced on his toes. “Come on!” he insisted, pushing the door open and pulling her inside. “You’re going to love this.”

After their short walk through the cold, the warmth of the cafe felt heavenly. The scents were even better though, a combination of baked goods and rich, luscious chocolate.

“Oh, my God,” Rose moaned, taking a deep breath of it as they got in line. “What is that?”

“That, my love, is why we’re here! You’ve had Gelbronese hot chocolate, but you haven’t truly lived until you’ve experienced the Julata orange mocha—made with real orange zest!”

The barista at the cash register overheard him as they reached the front of the line and looked at Rose. “Two orange mochas?” he asked.

Rose nodded. “If my husband says it’s the best, I trust him.” The Doctor giggled as he paid, and Rose relished the relaxed joy he projected—so different from how he’d felt when they’d run into him.

She started to ask him about his earlier anxiety, but their drinks were brought out almost as soon as they found a seat. The tall, glass mug was full to the brim, and there was a generous dollop of whipped cream on top of the mocha. Chocolate was drizzled over the top of the whipped cream, and Rose couldn’t resist scooping some of it up and licking it off her finger.

The Doctor winked at her when she hummed in pleasure. “The whipped cream is nothing compared to the actual drink,” he promised her. “And you know how much I love whipped cream.”

Rose clicked her tongue against her teeth. “You’re talking this up so much, there’s no way it’s going to live up to your recommendation.” The Doctor’s only response was to smirk at her over the rim of his own mug.

One sip of the Julata orange mocha and Rose knew the Doctor was right. The rich chocolate balanced by the dark roasted coffee would have been excellent on its own, but the bright citrus flavour tied it all together in what was easily the best coffee drink she’d ever had.

For a few moments, she floated on a haze of chocolate bliss, only brought back to Earth—or Julata—by the Doctor’s laughter. “I did tell you it was incredible,” he told her, his blue eyes dancing.
Rose debated teasing him, but decided to just enjoy her drink instead. The Doctor had chosen a seat for them by the window, and he pointed out little cultural things as people walked by. At some point, her hand found its way into his, and they sat clasped on the table just like they had on so many other dates.

With ten minutes left in their allotted hour, they left the cafe and started back to the TARDIS. Rose laced her fingers through the Doctor’s and squeezed gently as they walked down the street.

“Now, tell me why you’re feeling so out-of-sorts over this Christmas present.”

The Doctor’s eyes widened, and he dropped her hand as he attempted to bluster his way out of answering her question, even speed-walking in an unconscious attempt to avoid her. Rose lengthened her stride and watched with the same fond amusement she felt when her Doctor found himself facing a question he didn’t want to answer.

Eventually, he slowed down and his shoulders slumped. “I hadn’t expected you to see through this me so easily,” he grumbled.

Rose patted him on the arm. “Oh, Doctor. I know you. That isn’t limited to regeneration.”

His eyes softened. “Yes, you do.” He rubbed at the corners of his mouth, a new nervous tic Rose hadn’t seen. “Well. Without spoiling you too much, let’s just say you and I have been together for a long time, and I’m afraid I’m running out of impressive gift ideas.”

A half-dozen questions sprung to Rose’s lips: How long was a long time? Had she regenerated? Was this the Doctor’s next regeneration, or was there one or more in between? Had they solved the question of their mismatched lifespans?

They reached the alley where the TARDIS was parked while she was still gathering her thoughts, and the light on top of the ship flashed to welcome the future version of her pilot. Rose smiled and patted the door, then turned to the Doctor.

“Doctor… you know you don’t have to give me anything wildly elaborate, right?” she asked, homing in on the most important issue.

He grimaced. “It might be more accurate to say I don’t have any gift ideas, at all. Our life has been…” He paused, and she could feel him searching for the right words to explain himself without giving anything away. “More hectic than usual lately. We haven’t had much time to be alone, so I just… I don’t have any idea what you would want, Rose.”

The Doctor started pacing, and his hands found his hair, tugging at the close-cropped curls. “I feel like I don’t know you anymore,” he admitted at last.

Ah. There it was. The explanation for the vaguely morose attitude that had crept back into his demeanour. They weren’t a couple who needed to spend every moment together, but if they’d gotten out of the habit of taking their dates and finding time to be alone together…

Rose tugged his arm gently until he let go of his hair and looked at her. “Well, first of all,” she said soothingly, “I promise you that future me is missing you just as much as you’re missing me.”

The Doctor’s eyes were wide and hopeful. “Do you think so?”

Rose snorted. “I’m me, aren’t I?” She shook the Doctor’s hand until he smiled. “Look, Doctor. I don’t know how much time has passed, but one hundred years or one thousand, it doesn’t matter. I love you. And if we haven’t had time to be alone together—to just be us—then I guarantee you,
wherever I am right now, I’m missing you.”

“You’re with Jack,” he said automatically.

“With Jack, and missing you,” Rose repeated. “And that takes care of your second question.”

The Doctor’s brows knit together again, and Rose laughed.

“I love your eyebrows in this body,” she said. “Very expressive.” She reached up and smoothed them out. “If we’re missing each other, then maybe the perfect present isn’t a thing this year. Why don’t you pick me up and sweep me off for a romantic holiday, just the two of us?” She took his hand and laced their fingers together. “Barcelona, or Esperas, or maybe there’s someplace else I don’t know of yet that’s special to us.”

Finally, Rose felt the Doctor’s familiar excitement begin to echo through her. “Barcelona,” he mused. “We haven’t been there since—” He cut himself off and quickly locked down the thought. “Well, in a while.”

“There you go, then,” Rose encouraged. “Make the reservations right now. Get a room, or rent a private beach house. Get a table at that restaurant in the cliff. Make plans to take the hike again so you can humiliate another tour guide.”

The Doctor stepped closer to her and leaned down to whisper in her ear. “Do you know that one hundred years in the future from when we typically visit, that waterfall is no longer classified as a sacred site? I’ve waited centuries to see you skinny dipping in the moonlight there, Rose.”

Rose shuddered when his breath hit her ear, and she turned her head to brush her lips over his jaw. The Doctor sighed, then a moment later, he shifted enough to allow their lips to meet.

The only surprise in kissing a different Doctor was in how right it still felt. When the Doctor wrapped an arm around her waist, Rose swayed into his embrace, letting him control the kiss. His lips moved over hers with gentle adoration, and this glimpse of her own future brought tears to her eyes.

“If you don’t mind,” a familiar voice drawled from a few feet away, “that’s my bond mate.”

The Doctor reluctantly pulled away from the younger Rose, and glared at his pinstriped self. “Exactly,” he said smugly. “Which makes her my bond mate as well.”

Rose shook her head at him, and he could feel the mirth bubbling up inside her. “My Doctors,” she said affectionately. “You are both ridiculous, and I will always love you.”

The younger Doctor hummed happily, and the Doctor was ready to scoff at the sound when Rose turned to him and cupped his face gently in her soft hand. A purr rose in his throat at the caress, and hearing it, Rose stroked his face again.

“Go on,” she urged him. “Whisk me away on a magical Christmas holiday.”

The Doctor nodded, then a thought occurred to him and he frowned. Rose tilted her head, then she nodded. “Go ahead,” she told him.

With her permission, he pressed his fingers to her temples. This Christmas surprise wouldn’t be nearly as much fun if she knew what was coming.

*I’m going to be very, very careful, darling,* he told her as he approached her memories of that
afternoon. *Hopefully, I can just conceal your memories of exactly what you suggested for a gift, without hiding the rest of the conversation.*

That’d be nice, she agreed. *This has been a lovely afternoon.*

Rose’s innate trust in him humbled him, as it always had. After the attack on Midnight, he wouldn’t have blamed her if she hadn’t wanted anyone walking through her thoughts as intimately as he was now, but she simply closed her eyes and let him work.

With a delicate touch, the Doctor plucked the few memories of the last five minutes that would spoil her Christmas surprise and wrapped them up on a time delay. When he opened the TARDIS doors on Barcelona later that night and walked on the beach with his Rose, the memories would unlock.

It was a simple operation, despite the delicacy, and he was finished in less than five minutes. When he pulled out of Rose’s mind, she took a deep breath and opened her eyes.

Her full lips turned down in a pout. “How long am I going to have to wait to find out what you’re getting me?” She reached up and adjusted his tie.

The Doctor cleared his throat. He was very familiar with the persuasive abilities of his Rose. “You agreed,” he reminded her.

She sighed and stepped back, into the waiting arms of her linear Doctor. “I know. Just had to tease you a bit.”

The other Doctor raised an eyebrow and gestured towards the alley. “That’s probably about as much fiddling as the timelines can handle today,” he told the Doctor, voicing what they all knew.

The Doctor nodded. “I’ve got my own Rose waiting for her Christmas surprise.” He saluted his past self. “You can keep all of your memories, Doctor. But don’t try to figure out when in your future this happens. When the time is right, you’ll know.”

The other him raised his eyebrow, but he didn’t argue.

The Doctor looked at Rose, all pink and yellow in a way she hadn’t been for centuries, standing in the arms of the man he hadn’t been in almost that long—relatively speaking. “All my love to long ago,” he said, echoing the sentiment he’d said to his fifth incarnation, just before they’d been hit by the *Titanic*.

The younger Doctor smiled. “To days to come.”

The Doctor sighed as he undid his tie. Nothing about the day on Julata had gone quite the way he’d planned.

“Are you still pouting that the other you got to introduce me to Julata orange mochas?” Rose asked from the en-suite, where she was washing her makeup off.

“I wanted to see the look on your face the first time you tasted that perfection.” He unbuttoned his Oxford and tossed it in the laundry, then hung up his trousers and jacket.

She crossed the room and kissed his cheek before pulling a thin camisole out of the dresser. “And you will… one day.” She pressed her lips together and her eyes danced with laughter. “Think about it this way. If I hadn’t gone to the coffee shop with the older you first, the barista wouldn’t have
though I was engaged in some kind of sordid affair."

That pulled a chuckle from the Doctor as he remembered the note the concerned barista had passed him covertly along with their drinks. “That’s an aspect of being a time traveller I never really considered.” He hesitated a moment, then put on a pair of pyjama bottoms. It didn’t feel like they were going straight to bed.

Rose’s laughter was muffled as she pulled her camisole over her head. “What, that people would think your wife was cheating on you with all your different incarnations? They didn’t talk about that possibility at Time Lord school?”

The Doctor snorted. “Not hardly. Remember, most Time Lords didn’t actually leave Gallifrey.”

“True.” Rose tied the drawstring on her own pyjama bottoms, then held out her hand. “Come on, there’s a fire going in the study. We can sit and cuddle for a bit.”

The Doctor strongly suspected she had more in mind than a cuddle, and his suspicions were confirmed almost immediately. Once they were settled in to their preferred positions, with himself in the corner of the couch and her in his arms, she twisted slightly so she could see his face.

There was a furrow in her brow, and he reached out automatically to smooth it away. “What is it, love?”

“You told me something today.”

He frowned, then realised she meant his older self had told her something. “I thought I knew better than to mess with timelines.”

“Oh, you do,” she assured him, resting her hand on his knee. “This is something about us now, something I hadn’t thought to ask yet.” She shrugged. “He knew I would ask though, and that it was important for you to talk about it.”

The Doctor scowled. “Of course he did. The Doctor of Christmas yet to come. Showing you enough of the future to make you act in the present.” He sighed and shook his head. “Sorry, love. You know how I get when we meet other versions of me. What did I tell you to ask?”

He was prepared for any number of questions—anything, really, except what she said.

“Tell me what it was like for you on Midnight?”

The memories hit him at gale force, knocking the wind out of him for a moment. Being trapped in his own mind, unable to move or speak on his own. Feeling her agony and knowing how much danger she was in, and not being able to do a thing about it. Finding her on the jump seat, unconscious and non-responsive.

Rose’s soft hands pressed against his cheeks, and through the roaring in his ears, he heard her voice calling his name. He blinked once, then again, and then he could see her wide eyes staring down at him as she sat in his lap.

“Oh, Rose,” he gasped as he wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her close. He buried his face in the crook of her neck and took several deep breaths while she made shushing noises.

“Do you want to just show me?” she whispered, offering the same work around they’d used when they’d finally talked about the aftermath of the bond breaking.
The Doctor shuddered. “Not this time,” he replied, his voice raspy with unshed tears. “I can’t… it was in my head.”

“Right, of course.” Rose’s fingers combed through his hair, calming him down. “Future you said you needed to talk about it, love.”

The Doctor wanted to argue, but he knew he was right. He couldn’t go any longer without telling Rose what had happened.

He took a shaky breath and leaned back so he could see her face. “All right. I’ll tell you.”

Chapter End Notes

I am not actually showing the rest of this conversation. This is essentially a fade to black, letting you know that they do talk about Midnight. For you, the readers who read about the whole debacle already, it would rehash old news. It was important that you know Rose knows... and now you do.
Winning the Lottery

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Life. Vibrant colours. Dozens of voices talking all around her. Unfamiliar scents of unfamiliar foods, and a slight salty tang in the air if she breathed deeply enough.

Rose took the Doctor’s arm and beamed up at him. “Do you know what?” she murmured as she kissed his jaw. “Travelling with you—I love it.”

He turned his head slightly to catch her lips in a kiss. Yeah? Me too.

Warm happiness flooded Rose at his agreement as she melted into his kiss. It had been over a month since Midnight, and so far, they’d only taken trips back to places they were familiar with. Ones the Doctor trusted to be safe. She never complained, and didn’t even mind, really… but it hurt to watch him struggle to heal and know she couldn’t do anything to help.

Shan Shen wasn’t a huge step outside of his comfort zone, since he’d visited the planet before, but they’d never been there together. And more importantly, coming here had been his suggestion, completely unprompted.

The Doctor nipped at her lip. You’re thinking too much, love.

Just thinking about how I can’t imagine my life without you, she countered, smiling against his lips when he hummed happily in reply.

“Oi! Lovebirds! Stop snogging and start shopping.”

Rose giggled as she pulled away from the Doctor, then turned towards Donna. Jenny stood beside her, bouncing on her toes the same way the Doctor did when he was eager to explore a new world.

“Yeah, all right. Let’s go.” She reached for the Doctor’s hand and laced their fingers together.

“Which way, Doctor?”

He swung their hands between them as he scanned the alleys splitting off in all directions. “This way,” he said, pointing towards a narrow street with his free hand, then diving into the melee of vendors and tourists filling the space.

Rose couldn’t stop looking around as they weaved their way through the stalls. Paper lanterns, parasols, and banners with Chinese characters hung overhead, and the natives appeared to be dressed in traditional Chinese garb. Giddy excitement bubbled up inside her as she soaked it all in.

When she felt a hint of guilt from the Doctor, it was easy to suss out its source and dismiss it. You needed a break, she reminded him. I’m never gonna push you to do more than you’re comfortable with. A partnership only works if both partners are comfortable.

He brushed his thumb over her knuckles, and his guilt was replaced by gratitude. Then he pulled her over to a stall selling his favourite drink. “Come on, ladies,” he said, buying four mugs of the foaming concoction and handing them out. “Bottoms up!”

Rose clinked her cup against Jenny’s and winked at her before they both tipped their mugs up and took big gulps. “Ohhh, that is amazing,” Rose moaned as the rich coffee flavour of the alien
cappuccino hit her tongue.

“I’d rather have a water,” Donna protested.

“No,” the Doctor insisted, taking his own drink. “You are going to love it.” Donna sighed, but lifted the cup to her lips. “One, two, three!” They both tipped their drinks back.

“Lovely!” Donna agreed a moment later as she licked the foam moustache from her top lip.

“See, I told you!”

They hovered near the coffee stand while they finished their drinks, so they could hand the ceramic mugs back when they were done. Jenny sidled over to Rose as they browsed the nearby stalls, and Rose spotted the Doctor ducking into a tiny shop as soon as their daughter had her occupied.

“Did you need something, Jenny, or did the Doctor just ask you to distract me while he stepped in there to buy me a present?”

Jenny pressed her tongue to the back of her teeth, and Rose laughed. “I won’t peek at what kind of shop it is,” she promised.

“Actually, I was wondering if maybe you and Dad would like to wander alone for a bit,” Jenny said. “I mean…” She gestured at Donna. “Donna promised to show me how haggling works.”

Rose nodded. “Of course. Ask the Doctor before you take off if haggling is acceptable on this planet, but you’re always welcome to explore on your own.”

The Doctor exited the shop just as she finished her sentence, and Rose quickly looked away before he spotted her watching for him. “What are you up to?” he said as he joined her and Jenny.

Donna returned from dropping off the mugs. “I was planning to take Jenny and introduce her to the ancient practice of haggling.”

“Is haggling allowed on Shan Shen?” Rose asked.

The Doctor nodded quickly. “Oh, absolutely. And Shan Shen is perfectly harmless—I can’t think of anything you need to watch out for.”

Donna snorted. “I’m gonna be looking for a salt shaker so I can toss some salt over my left shoulder, thanks to that statement,” she muttered. “Come on, Jenny!”

The Doctor shook his head as they watched the two women blend into the crowd. “What is it?” Rose asked.

“Jenny and Donna,” he mused. “It’s not a friendship you’d think of automatically, but somehow, it works.”

Rose shrugged. “Well, they both love to travel. They love the adventure of new places and doing things they’ve never done before.” She tugged on the lapel of the Doctor’s overcoat. “Those are all the reasons they make excellent travelling companions, after all,” she pointed out.

The Doctor wrapped an arm around her waist and hugged her quickly. “Quite right,” he agreed. Then he started down a different alley, and Rose easily kept up with him.

An idea built in the back of Rose’s mind as they weaved their way through the stalls. As the Doctor slid the fancy new teapot they’d just purchased into his pocket, Rose bit her lip and looked up at him.
“Oh, no,” he groaned.

“What?”

“You’re biting your lip, which means you’re about to suggest something I’m not going to like, but you’ll convince me to go along with it because I’m rubbish at saying no to you.”

Rose clasped her hands in front of her and leaned towards the Doctor, looking up at him through her eyelashes. “We could just skip to the part where you say yes?”

The Doctor rubbed at his forehead, but Rose could see the smile he was trying to hide. “What am I saying yes to, love?”

“Would you mind if I had a wander, just for a bit?”

Fear flickered over the bond, but it felt more like a habit than a genuine emotion, so Rose pressed on. “Shan Shen is safe, right? Perfectly harmless, you said.”

The Doctor nodded slowly. “Right, yes. But… I thought we were going to explore it together.”

“And we will. I promise.” She put her hand on his chest. “I want to get you something, Doctor. Just… I really want to surprise you with something, and I can’t do that if you’re with me the whole time.” She looked up at him pleadingly. “You should be able to understand that—don’t think I didn’t see you dart into that stall earlier while I was talking to Jenny.”

His hand reached automatically for his coat pocket, then he flushed when he realised he’d given himself away. “All right, in that case, why don’t we meet right back here in an hour?”

Rose beamed at him, then pushed herself up on her toes and kissed his cheek. “Thank you!” she called out as she pivoted and darted into the crowds.

They were in the middle of a food section of the market, and she worked her way past fruit and vegetable vendors hawking things like shukina and peshmoni. Much as the Doctor loved alien foods, she doubted there was much here that he hadn’t tried before, so she kept going, intent on finding him something truly special.

She couldn’t explain why she was so determined to find him something from Shan Shen—maybe it was because this was the first trip they’d taken since Midnight where he’d seemed truly relaxed. For whatever reason, she knew she wanted him to have something that would remind him of their visit here.

A flash of gold caught her eye, and she turned around, thinking she’d found a clothing stall. Instead, it was a young woman dressed in black and gold, with her thick black hair pulled back in a braid.

“Oh, hi,” Rose said.


Rose nearly laughed. Of all the things a stranger could offer a time traveller, predictions of the future had to be the absolute last thing that would be of interest. “Nah, I’m much more interested in the present, thanks.”

*Time’s in flux anyway, so anything you showed me would only be one possible future.*
The woman tilted her head, the tiniest crease of a frown in the middle of her forehead. “Don’t you want to know if you’re going to be happy?”

Rose snorted. “You’re a rubbish fortune teller, mate, or you’d know I’m already very happy.”

The woman’s eyes narrowed. “The man you were with. He will laugh when you tell him my ridiculous ideas of your future.”

That got a genuine laugh from Rose. “All right, you’ve convinced me,” she said, and allowed herself to be led into the dimly lit stall.

The fortune teller stoked the fire in the brazier and gestured for Rose to take one of the two chairs beside it. Rose rolled her eyes again, but sat down and didn’t pull back when the woman took her hands.

“Oh, yes, very different,” she said, then looked up at Rose. “The man you are with. He is the most remarkable man. How did you meet him?”

Rose arched an eyebrow. “Aren’t you supposed to be giving me the answers, not the other way around?” The smell of incense in the stall was cloying, and she really wanted to just pull her hands away and walk off.

As if sensing this, the woman tightened her grip just slightly. “I see the future,” she said curtly. “Tell me the past. When did your lives cross?”

Rose sighed, but answered the question. “He blew up my job.”

“That is what happened, but what led you to that meeting?” the woman pressed.

Rose heard a rustling behind her and shifted in her chair, making sure her bag was tightly between her feet so no one could steal it. She wouldn’t normally suspect a scam, but the way the woman had been so insistent that she allow her fortune to be read was suspicious.

She considered the question, a faint smile on her face. “Yeah… we met because I took the lottery money down that night.”

Rose regretted the words as soon as they passed her lips. Time seemed to move sideways for just an instant, and her head swam as the details of the last six years of her life went out of focus, before sharpening again.

“What’s happening?”

“It’s the incense,” the fortune teller told her. “Just breathe deep.”

Rose tried, but she still wanted to throw up. “I should… I should go.”

“Tell me more,” the fortune teller said desperately. “You said you took the lottery money down the night you met him. What would have happened if you hadn’t?”

“Well, I wouldn’t have met him.” But that wasn’t all. Rose remembered what the Doctor had told her about his plans for that night—he would have died.

“Why did you take the money down? Was it your turn?”

“No.” Rose blinked, trying to remember the details that seemed so fuzzy all of a sudden. “No, it was supposed to be Keisha.”
The fortune teller narrowed her eyes. “Your life could have gone one way or the other,” she intoned. “When was the moment. When did you choose?”

“Hey, Rose. D’you have plans tonight?”

Rose rolled her eyes as she carefully stacked the neatly folded jumper. “Nah. I think there’s a match on, so me and Mickey might go to the pub. Why?”

Keisha twisted her necklace, and Rose grinned at her friend. “Hot date?”

“Maybe.”

“All right then. I’ll take care of your closing list so you can skip out early.”

Keisha squealed and wrapped Rose in a hug. “Thanks, babe!”

“I… my friend, she had a date and she asked me to do it.”

The rustling sound was louder, and Rose almost thought she felt something on her back. Different timelines swirled around her, so fast they made her head spin. Then, for just an instant, she saw a future where she’d never met the Doctor, one where he died in the explosion and their entire life together was erased.

With the last bit of strength she had, Rose yanked her hands from the fortune teller’s and stood up. “What are you doing to me?” she gasped.

The fortune teller’s eyes were wide, and Rose knew, somehow, that she wasn’t supposed to be aware of whatever the other woman was doing to manipulate the timelines. But as quickly as she realised that, her vision greyed out again, and she knew she was going to fall.

“What are you doing to my wife?” the Doctor snarled as he pushed his way into the stall, just in time to catch Rose. She felt him pluck something off her back and toss it onto the fire.

The fortune teller cowered before them. “You were so strong. What are you?”

“Time Lords,” the Doctor snapped. “Which means your little Time Beetle won’t work on us. Go back to the Trickster and tell him to try again.”

The woman turned and ran, and the Doctor scooped Rose up into his arms. “Come on,” he murmured. “Let’s go home.”

“Donna and Jenny,” Rose protested, her voice weak.

“We can text Donna when we get back to the TARDIS, and she’ll tell Jenny. You’ll feel better once you’re on the ship. She exists in a state of temporal grace, so it’ll help the nausea pass.” He clenched his jaw. “She’ll feel better once you’re home, too. She’s a bit panicked right now. We both are.”

Rose tried to lift her hand to stroke his jaw, but she was too tired. Instead, she rested her head on his shoulder and let him carry her home.

The TARDIS whistled loudly when they stepped inside, making even the Doctor wince. “I know,” he told her. “But it didn’t happen.” He carried Rose through the console room into the corridor, and a door flew open on his right.

The Doctor set Rose down on the infirmary bed and put a hand on her shoulder when she tried to get up. “Why’re we here?” she asked, her voice slurred.
“Because someone just tried to change time around you, and I need to make sure you’re all right,” he said as he ran the sonic over her.

“M’fine, Doctor.” Rose tried to reach for his hand, but like before, she was too weak.

“Maybe, but I want to be sure.” Finished with the scans, he sat down on the edge of the bed and brushed the hair out of her eyes. She leaned into his touch and that tiny caress nearly broke his control.

He clenched his jaw and took a few deep breaths, until he thought he could speak without his voice cracking. “What kinds of questions did the fortune teller ask you?”

Rose wrinkled her nose as she thought. “She wanted… She wanted to know how we met. And then she kept pushing me to tell her what would have happened if my day had gone differently, if I hadn’t taken the lottery money down.”

The Doctor shuddered. They’d talked about that before, and it wasn’t a happy prospect. “She wanted to rewrite your life so you never met me,” he realised.

“I think so.” Rose sighed and rested her head on the pillow for a few moments, then she looked at him again. “Doctor? How did you know?”

“Our timelines are linked,” he reminded her. “So when the Time Beetle started changing your past, I could feel the way time went wibbly around you.” It was only half the answer, but it was the part she didn’t already know—he didn’t need to tell her that he’d felt her discomfort like a shiver down his own spine.

“Wibbly?” Rose smiled weakly. “Is that a technical term?”

“Something like that.”

“Is that what made me dizzy and nauseated?”

He nodded. “Yeah. Fiddling with another person’s timelines is usually undetected, but Time Lords are uniquely equipped to sense shifting timelines. And when the Time Lord has a bond, the ramifications of the shift are expounded, making it uncomfortable or even painful.”

Rose tried to ignore the unspoken truth that if she were still human, she wouldn’t have noticed what was happening. She scooted closer to him and rested her hand on his knee. “What did she do? You called it a… Time Beetle?”

The Doctor scowled. “Part of the Trickster’s Brigade,” he explained, unable to keep the anger out of his voice. “They were just hoping to cause a slight shift in timelines, but you… well, that’s not how it worked.”

Rose didn’t respond, and the Doctor watched for a few moments as she fought valiantly against sleep. He shook his head, then brushed a kiss over her forehead. “Go to sleep, love,” he whispered. “Stay with me?”

The Doctor swallowed hard, then swung his legs up so he was sitting beside Rose on the bed. She immediately shifted towards him, ending up with her head in his lap and an arm slung over his legs, as if to anchor him in place. He sighed and combed his fingers through her hair. After the way their timelines had been disrupted, he needed to be touching her—and it seemed she felt the same way.
Rose had been asleep for half an hour when the terminal beeped with the scan results. He carefully slid off the bed to read over the results. Relief coursed through him a moment later. Despite the best effort of the Trickster’s Brigade, Rose was just fine.

Alone on the bed, Rose whimpered in her sleep and rolled in search of him. The Doctor picked her up once more, this time to carry her to their room. *Shhh,* he said when she snuffled softly. *We’re just going to bed.*

In their room, Rose woke up just long enough to not be a total deadweight when he changed her into her pyjamas. *Come to bed, love,* she requested as she slid between the covers. *Wanna cuddle with you.*

The Doctor smiled and changed into his own pyjamas. To his surprise, Rose was still awake when he slid under the covers. “Is something the matter?” he asked, sensing that she was almost fully awake now.

She propped herself up on her elbow and looked down at him. “Tell me what’s bothering you.”

He reached out and brushed hair out of her face, than ran his fingers over her features. Rose reached up and held his hand to her face, and that tenderness finally broke his control.

Two tears slipped down his face. “I thought… I didn’t know what was happening to you,” he told her, his voice raspy. “I was just shopping for an anniversary present, and suddenly, our bond went haywire as your timeline stretched and bent.”

He shuddered at the memory. “I dropped whatever I was holding and ran out of the stall. The bond snapped back into focus and I was able to follow it to you. Then just before I reached you, I could feel your fear.”

Rose nodded. “I knew something was wrong. My memories kept swimming in and out of focus. And she wouldn’t let me go.”

The Doctor felt the muscle in his jaw twitch. “Oh, she would have,” he said grimly. “If you hadn’t already been halfway to rescuing yourself when I got to you, I would have made sure she let you go.”

Rose grinned up at him, her tongue peeking out. “It was a two-person operation, for sure,” she agreed. “I’m glad you were there to catch me.” She put her hand on his chest. “You always catch me before I fall.”

He shook his head. “Not always.” A dark thought crossed his mind, and he couldn’t stop it before it slipped past his lips. “Do you ever wish you hadn’t bonded with me?”

Rose had been on the verge of drifting off again, but that woke her up completely. She pushed herself upright and stared down at the Doctor. He was avoiding her gaze, leaving her to stare at the top of his head.

“How can you ask me that?”

He looked at her then, and the guilt in his eyes surprised her. “This is the second time in less than two months that you’ve been hurt because of our bond.”

Rose shook her head. “Today wasn’t about the bond,” she argued. “That woman just knew that I travelled with you, not that we have a bond. And in the end, it was the bond that gave me the strength to hold out against her.”
“That still leaves the entity,” he reminded her.

A hard knot settled in the pit of Rose’s stomach. “Doctor,” she asked carefully, “do you regret our bond?”

“No,” he answered immediately. Then his lips twisted into a self-deprecating smile. “And how selfish does that make me?” He pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. “But I can’t bring myself to regret something that’s given me so much joy, even though I know it’s put you in danger.”

Rose rolled her eyes and lightly tapped him on the back of his head with the flat of her hand. His forehead wrinkled, and he pouted. “What was that for?”

“For being a space dunce, as Donna would say,” Rose answered acerbically. “If I don’t regret our bond, do you really think it’s selfish of you not to? Doctor, I don’t want you to regret it. It makes me so happy to hear you talk about how happy it’s made you, because that’s exactly how I feel. And when you ask if I wish we’d never bonded…” She swallowed. “That hurt, Doctor.”

She felt the moment understanding replaced the guilt that had shortsighted him. “Oh,” he breathed. “Oh, Rose.”

He lay back down and opened his arms to her, and Rose sniffed as she curled up against his side. “Don’t do that again, please,” she whispered.

“I won’t. I won’t, love—I promise.”

“So we’re agreed? Our bond is a good thing, even if sometimes it gets used against us?”

The Doctor brushed her hair back over her ear and pressed a kiss to her forehead. “Absolutely.”

Rose took a deep breath and let the honey and clove scent of his skin relax her. Then a yawn caught her by surprise, and suddenly, her eyelids were heavy.

The Doctor chuckled and rested his hand in the small of her back. “Go to sleep, Rose. You’re safe now.”

ToOoOoOoOo

The sound of an alarm blaring woke Rose up, but even as her hand went up to slap it, something felt off. She hadn’t woken up to an alarm in years.

What’s going on? she wondered as her eyes fluttered open.

As soon as she caught sight of the pink walls, she was wide awake and sitting up in bed. She hadn’t slept in this room in… well, nearly as long as it had been since she’d woken up to an alarm.

There was something else off, and it took her a moment to place it. The insistent throbbing in her head finally helped her pinpoint it.

The bond was gone.

“What the hell is happening?” she yelled as she jumped out of bed.

Even the missing bond didn’t feel the way it should. Instead of being constant, migraine level pain, it was just a sense of wrongness in her head—sort of like the dull throbbing of a hangover.

The phone on the nightstand beeped, and Rose absently realised as she grabbed it that this was her
old phone, the one she’d had when she met the Doctor.

There were dozens of missed calls and voicemails, plus a few text messages that seemed to be condolences. Rose frowned; what was going on??

Looking down at herself, a niggling possibility presented itself. She was in her old pyjamas, in her old room, with her old phone.

“Oh, my God, what is happening?” she muttered as she shuffled out of her room.

“Yeah, it’s a bit strange, I’ll give you that.”

Rose screamed and threw her phone at the unexpected person sitting on her sofa. “Mickey! What the hell are you doing here? Shouldn’t you be in Pete’s World?”

Mickey Smith chuckled. “I told them. I told them you’d be able to remember the prime timeline, but no one believed me.”

“What do you mean, the prime timeline? And why do I feel like I’m back to my life before I met the Doctor?”

Mickey’s grin disappeared. “Because you are, babe. Well, more like your life if you’d never met the Doctor.”

Rose’s stomach turned. “That’s what that woman tried to get me to do,” she whispered. “She tried to get me to change my past so I wouldn’t meet the Doctor… and then he’d die when he blew up Henrik’s.”

Mickey nodded. “And then the two of you wouldn’t be able to stop the Nestene Consciousness the next day,” he continued.

“The condolences on my phone…” Tears welled up in her eyes, and it was hard to breathe. “Mum was in town shopping that night.”

Mickey stood up and put his hands on her shoulders. “Look at me, Rose.” He waited until she’d taken a deep breath and was looking into his eyes before he continued. “None of this is real. Remember that. This is just an alternate timeline.”

Rose brushed a tear away from her eyes. “Right. I know that.” She tilted her head and looked at Mickey. “You never told me… why are you here?”

“Come on, sit with me.”

They sat down on the couch, and Mickey handed Rose a cup of tea. “It may have been five years since I saw you last, but I reckon I still know how to make tea the way you like it.”

“Five years?” Rose felt a pang of sorrow.

“Well, I’m not counting the few hours at Canary Wharf.” Mickey nudged her. “You should have heard your mum going on when you disappeared right out of Pete’s arms, by the way.”

Rose laughed. “Yeah, I bet. Now, tell me what’s going on. How are you even here? We closed the walls between the worlds.”

“Yeah, about that. When you get back to the Doctor, you need to tell him. Tell him the stars are going out, Rose.”
She blinked. “What do you mean, the stars are going out?”

But even as she asked the question, she could feel another tug, and she knew she only had a few seconds left to talk to Mickey.

“Just tell him that, Rose,” he ordered. “Reality is breaking down, and the stars are going out.”

Rose woke up again, and this time, everything felt just as right as it had felt wrong before. She could hear the Doctor’s hearts beating beneath her ear, and his arm was a comforting, familiar weight around her waist. When she opened her eyes, the walls were the sandy/coral colour she’d chosen when she’d decided to paint a few months before, and she and the Doctor were both wrapped up in their blue duvet.

But most importantly, she could feel him in her mind, the bond connecting them just as it always did.

That same bond woke the Doctor up when he sensed her anxiety, and she traced a finger over his eyebrow as his eyes opened. “You weren’t out for long,” he observed, his voice still gravelly from sleep.

“Bad dream,” she told him.

“Want to tell me about it?”

“I think I need to.”

Fully awake now, the Doctor narrowed his eyes and studied Rose for a moment. What he’d taken for lingering fear from a nightmare he now realised ran deeper than that. “Why don’t we go sit in the study?” he suggested.

Rose nodded, and they both rolled out of bed and pulled on their dressing gowns. When they entered the study, there was a fire going in the fireplace and tea waiting for them on the coffee table.

The Doctor waited until Rose had lifted her mug and breathed deeply of the tea before asking, “What did you dream about?”

She took a sip and considered the question. “I think it was… I think it was what would have happened, if the Trickster had succeeded today. I was back in my old room at the flat, and I had dozens of messages on my phone because Mum had died in the Auton attack.”


Rose shook her head. “No, I know that. But the important part is what comes next. Because when I got up, Mickey was waiting for me in the lounge. Only… not the Mickey from back then, this was an older Mickey.” Her fingers tightened on the handle of her mug. “Remember, I told you I thought he was the one returning.”

The Doctor’s time senses started buzzing when Rose mentioned Mickey. “Go on,” he said, his voice tense.

“Mickey said he was there because… the stars are going out.” She closed her eyes, trying to remember more details. “I asked how he got there, since the walls between the worlds are closed, and that’s what he said. The stars are going out.”
The Doctor wanted to protest that all this had happened in a timeline that didn’t even exist, but he could feel in his bones that it wasn’t true. “Well,” he said, trying to be cheerful. “We did wonder how your family could possibly have moved back to this universe, like Melody said.”

“So you think it’s real then?” Rose asked.

The Doctor nodded. “It fits too well with other things that have happened to not be real.”

“Then what do we do?”

He stood up and pulled Rose to her feet, and they walked back to their room. “Well, first we need to text Donna—we never did that earlier—and ask her and Jenny to come back to the TARDIS.” He continued detailing his plan as they got dressed. “Once we’re all on board, we’ll take a quick hop back to Earth, maybe check in with UNIT and see if they’ve noticed anything about stars going out.”

“Weird thing about that dream,” Rose said as she texted Donna. “It was supposed to be an alternate timeline, right? So I was nineteen-year-old Rose, who’d never met you—didn’t even know you existed.”

“Yep.” The Doctor loosened his tie so it didn’t feel so tight against the lump in his throat.

She slid her phone into her jeans pocket and pulled her hair into a ponytail. “Well, then how come I remembered you? And I knew we were supposed to have a bond?”

“Well, you weren’t really stuck in that timeline,” he pointed out reasonably. “You must have caught just enough of a glimpse of that timeline this morning to remember the important detail—Mickey saying the stars were going out. And then your brain turned it into a dream so you would remember to tell me.”

“Right… so because it was a dream, I was able to be both younger Rose and the real Rose, at once. Got it.”

Rose held out her hand and offered the Doctor a smile. Her dream had reminded them of the life they would have been stuck in if the fortune teller had succeeded, and they were both trying to forget that sober almost-reality.

She let out a little sigh of relief when he smiled back and took her hand. “Come on.” She nodded towards the door. “Jenny and Donna will be back any minute.”

Despite the uncertainty and the obvious danger of the situation Mickey had described—the stars were going out?—Rose felt just a little bit of excitement trickle in as they walked to the console room. The Doctor was right. This might be what allowed her family to come to this universe… and that meant she might see her mum again soon.

But all thoughts of seeing her mum and meeting her baby brother or sister vanished when the Doctor pulled the door open. They both sucked in a breath when they saw two words repeated over and over on every surface.

Bad Wolf.

Chapter End Notes
We are almost to the final arc of the story! Next week, we'll get a quick glimpse of Pete, Mickey, and Jackie, and then in January, we'll start with Stolen Earth!
Moving Plans

Chapter Notes

I'm back! I hadn't planned to take a break for the holidays, but in the end, I really needed the two weeks off. But now we're back to normal life (alas!), and updates return to their regularly scheduled Tuesdays.

Jackie sighed wearily as she slowly closed Tony’s door. It had been almost impossible to get the toddler to stay in bed tonight, and she desperately needed a cuppa—or maybe something a little stronger.

Instead of taking the back stairs directly to the kitchen, she walked down the short hallway to the front of the house. Mickey had come over right after dinner, and Pete had taken him up to his office. But that had been two hours ago and they probably wouldn’t turn down some kind of drink.

The first thing Jackie noticed as she turned the corner was that the office door was just barely ajar, like someone had meant to shut it but hadn’t quite pulled it tight enough. The second thing she noticed was voices.

“Have you told Jackie yet?”

Jackie slowed down when she heard Mickey’s question. Has Pete told me what yet? she wondered.

Pete sighed, and she could picture him rubbing his hand over his balding head. “No, I haven’t. I didn’t want to get her hopes up. You know how much she misses Rose.”

Jackie reached blindly for the wall to prop herself up and pressed her hand to her mouth to hold in a sob.

“Yeah, I know. But now that everything is almost complete, you’ve got to tell her. You can’t just spring it on her on the day of.”

Pete laughed ruefully. “I don’t know. That sounds like a pretty good idea to me. Hand her a dimension hopper, tell her we’re going to see Rose, and hope that in her excitement, she misses the fact that I’ve been keeping this from her for months.”

Jackie’s shock had paralysed her momentarily, but anger sent sensation rushing back into her legs. They’d been keeping this from her for months? She strode down the hallway and shoved the door all the way open, enjoying the way Pete and Mickey’s mouths fell open.

She focused on her husband, seated behind his mahogany desk. The last bit of twilight coming in from the window behind him cast a halo around him, but it didn’t conceal the way his freckled skin had flushed a bright pink.

“Hope I don’t notice you’ve been lying to me? How long have we been married, Peter Alan Tyler? And you really think that’s going to work?”

“Jacks.” He rubbed at his neck. “How much did you hear?”
“I heard my name, and Rose’s, and that you’ve been lying to me.”

Jackie pointed at Mickey, sliding his way down the leather sofa until he was close enough to the door to slink away. “And where do you think you’re going, Mickey Smith? You were a part of this, so you can take your punishment along with Pete.”

Pete sighed and slumped into his desk chair. “It’s not what you think, love.”

She crossed her arms over her chest. “You said something about going to see Rose, but she and the Doctor said it was impossible. Not that I wouldn’t enjoy proving myself wrong and seeing my daughter again, but is what you’re doing safe, Pete? For Tony?”

A hand touched her elbow, and Jackie looked back at Mickey. “Sit down, Jackie,” he said, scooting over to make room for her on the couch. “We’ve got a story to tell you.”

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Half an hour later, Jackie’s head was spinning. The stars were going out? It sounded like something out of one of those old science fiction films Pete liked to watch.

“Whole solar systems are just disappearing?” She stared out the window, where she could see a few stars appearing on the dusky blue sky. They’d told her twice, but she couldn’t believe it. “How does that even happen?”

Pete sighed and rubbed at his forehead. “Reality is breaking down,” he said patiently, for the third time. “Things that used to exist don’t anymore, including the stars.”

“And including the walls between the universes,” Mickey added. “That’s how I’ve been able to jump back and forth, looking for the Doctor.”

If those walls weren’t there anymore… Suddenly, what she’d overheard Pete say clicked, and Jackie gasped. “Pete! I could see Rose! And she could meet Tony!”

He came around his desk and sat down on the couch beside her. “Well, that’s actually what I’ve been working on without telling you, Jacks. What would you say to immigrating?”

“You mean…” Jackie’s mouth was dry and she swallowed a few times before she could talk again. “You mean move back to that universe, all three of us? Live where we could see Rose any time we wanted?”

He nodded. “Yeah. Your daughter is there, and I don’t know much about the Doctor, but something tells me that he can’t really leave that universe. Timelines or reality or something. And if he’s not leaving, then of course Rose won’t. But we could go there.”

“Are you sure, Pete?” Moving to a new universe was the hardest thing Jackie had ever done, and Pete had been there with her the whole time. He knew exactly what he was volunteering for.

“Yeah, I’m sure,” he told her.

Jackie put her hand over her mouth, then brushed a few tears away from her eyes. “Thank you.”

She pursed her lips, already making mental lists of the things she wanted to take with them. Nothing big, of course, but their wedding pictures and Tony’s baby album… A pang of longing struck her for all the mementos she’d lost in the old flat.
Maybe Rose and the Doctor could take us back to right after Canary Wharf so we could clean the flat out, she thought hopefully. I’d love to introduce Tony and Pete to Bev…

Her stomach sank when reality intruded, shattering her dreams around her. “Pete, we can’t. You’ve been dead for twenty years or more back there, and what about me? I just disappeared after Canary Wharf. I can’t reappear with someone who looks identical to my dead husband.”

Mickey leaned forward. “I’ve been laying the groundwork for that actually,” he explained. “I found out on a recent jump that our old friend Captain Jack—remember him, Jackie—he works for Torchwood Three in the prime universe. An’ I’ll bet he’s got the resources to give us all fake identities.” He stretched his arms and laced his hands behind his head. “We might not be able to live in London, but there are other cities in Britain.”

“Us?” Jackie echoed. “Are you coming too, then?”

He nodded. “There’s nothing for me here, now that my gran is dead. And if you and Pete go back, and Rose is there…” He shrugged. “You’re the only family I have, Jackie.”

Jackie raised an eyebrow. “Then maybe remember that next time you help my husband keep a secret from me for months on end.”

Mickey chuckled, but Pete groaned. “Aw, come on. It was a good surprise in the end, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah. Yeah, it’s a good surprise.” Jackie looked around the room and felt a pang of regret. She loved this house. Where would they even live in the other universe, if they couldn’t go back to the flat? How would they buy a home? “Pete. How are we gonna live there without any money?”

She scowled when Pete and Mickey both laughed. “Oi! That’s right, laugh at me when I’m being practical. We don’t need to be rich, but we do need to have something to live on.”

The men shook their heads, broad grins still stretched across their faces. Pete took her hand and brushed his thumb over her knuckles.

“I’ve been slowly converting our stock options into gold,” he explained to her. “Mickey assures me gold is just as valuable in your universe as it is here. There’s a briefcase in the safe with more than enough to provide a comfortable life for us.”

“Well what are we waiting for?” Jackie demanded. “Come on, let’s go!”

Mickey tugged on his ear. “Well, the thing is Jackie… We need to find the Doctor first and take care of the stars going out before we can move.”

Jackie rolled her eyes. Of course it couldn’t be easy. “Well, he said it. Said that if the walls weren’t there, both worlds would collapse.”

Pete walked back over to his desk and pulled two items out of his drawer before sitting back down with her. “Exactly. So, we have a plan. Mickey has been doing the recon, jumping back and forth looking for the Doctor and Rose. As soon as he locates the TARDIS, I’ll jump through after him. We’ll work with the Doctor and Rose, and hopefully we can save the universe again, just like last time.”

Jackie didn’t care for where this was going, but she kept quiet while Pete finished his explanation.

He held up one of the items in his hands, a fancy looking radio. “I’ll call you once the universe is stabilised. Once you’ve got the all clear, you’ll hop over with Tony and the briefcase using this.”
The other item was a familiar yellow disk—the dimension hopper that had pulled her to this universe in the first place. Jackie took it from him, the memories of that day still vivid in her mind.

“How will I find you though?” she asked. “I can’t just hop over. Tony and I could end up anywhere!”

He shook his head. “There’s a homing device on Mickey’s dimension cannon. He’ll turn it on as soon as he locates the TARDIS so I can follow him through, then we’ll turn it on again when it’s all over.”

“But won’t the walls close again after things go back to normal?” Jackie pressed, still not confident of this plan of theirs.

Mickey scooted forward. “Nah. Malcolm reckons we’ll have at least a few hours before things are solid again, maybe even a day or two. Plenty of time for you to get Tony and join us.”

Jackie went over the details in her head once. It seemed pretty clear. “Yeah, I can do that,” she agreed.

The stars were going out, and the universe might be falling down around them, but despite it all, one thought was at the centre of Jackie’s mind. She reached for Pete’s hands. “Pete. I’m gonna see Rose again soon.”

He smiled and pulled her close. “I know, love.”

Jackie let Pete hold her as she considered his plan. There was just one part she didn’t like. If Peter Alan Tyler thought she was just going to sit around on her arse while she waited for a second phone call from him, he didn’t know her as well as he thought he did.

Dalek Caan’s high-pitched cackle echoed against the walls of the vault. He waved his tentacles gleefully as the timelines fell into place.

“Yes, it is all happening as I have foreseen,” he cooed.

The captain, made immortal by Bad Wolf.

The doctor, working with UNIT on Project Indigo.

The reporter, with the computer capable of calling the Doctor from every phone on Earth.

The former Prime Minister, creating the Subwave Network.

The three travellers from the parallel universe, bringing the ominous warning that the stars were going out.

The Doctor, who would be there to witness the end of all things Dalek along with his companions.

And Bad Wolf herself, who would be the one to end it all.

“The Children of Time are gathering, and when they have gathered, all things will end!”
Every single sign and banner on Shan Shen said the same two words: Bad Wolf. Rose spun around and looked at the TARDIS. Instead of “Police Public Call Box,” it too said Bad Wolf.

The ship sang in Rose’s mind, and a gold haze obscured her vision. For a moment, the typical tapestry of timelines disappeared, leaving one solid gold line pulling her forward. She saw her hand reaching for something on the TARDIS console, and the pull of the moment was almost enough to carry her through time into her own future.

She reached blindly for the Doctor’s hand. Feeling his strong fingers wrapped around hers anchored her in reality, and after she blinked a few times, she could see normally again. The vision was forgotten as soon as it faded, leaving only a sense that something was coming.

The light spilling out through the door they’d left ajar was red instead of the typical blueish green. The TARDIS’ concern called to Rose, and she pushed the door all the way open.

“Rose?”

The Doctor’s worry dampened the music, and she looked up at him.

“Let’s wait right here for Jenny and Donna. They shouldn’t be long.”

“Yeah, of course,” Rose agreed, even though she was itching to get inside and let the TARDIS take them where they needed to go.

Thankfully, Jenny and Donna ran up to them a moment later. “Why do all the signs say ‘Bad Wolf?’” Jenny asked breathlessly as they ran in through the TARDIS’ open doors.

The cloister bell tolled ominously in the background as the Doctor slammed the door shut behind him and ran to the console. “It’s the end of the universe,” he said tersely.

“So, more of the same really.” Donna sat down on the jump seat and rolled her eyes.

“No, not more of the same,” Rose countered. She and the Doctor were spinning in opposite directions around the console, trying to get the coordinates set. They were going to Earth, in Donna’s time. “I got a message from a parallel universe, which should be impossible. Mickey told me the stars were going out, which should also be impossible.” She looked up at Donna. “Whatever this is, it’s bigger than anything we’ve dealt with before.”

“What do you mean, parallel worlds?” Donna questioned.

Rose shook her head quickly. Her time senses were buzzing with something she’d never felt before, and right now, touching the console, it was all she could do not to look at it—even though she knew instinctively that it wasn’t time yet.

“We don’t really have time to explain multiversal theory right now, Donna,” she said, the tension putting an uncharacteristic bite in her voice.

The Doctor looked up at her, but Rose just grabbed the lever and threw it. “Allons-y,” she muttered.
The cloister bell stopped as soon as the time rotor started moving, but the light shining around them was still a dangerous red colour. Rose grabbed onto the console as the ship shook and rattled its way through the Vortex to Earth. Jenny stumbled into her, then hooked her elbow around the railing to keep from being thrown to the ground.

When they landed with a dull thunk, the Doctor tore around the console to the door and flung it open. Rose started to follow him, but she was momentarily distracted by a blue leather jacket that had appeared on the coat rack. Unique as the colour was, she knew she’d seen it before—recently, even.

She shook her head and grabbed the jacket, pulling it on as she left the ship. In the process of shoving her arms into the sleeves, she missed that the Doctor had stopped dead and ran smack into his back.

“Sorry, Rose,” he said absently, shifting over so she could stand beside him.

Rose braced herself for whatever had caught him so off guard. They already knew something was very wrong, but…

She blinked and looked up and down the street. It was just… England. On a typical grey, English day. The wind blew a strand of Rose’s hair into her face, and she pushed it back as she looked around.

“It’s fine,” she mumbled. But she’d left a message for herself, and Bad Wolf wasn’t needed on ordinary days.

“I know,” he agreed. “Everything’s fine.”

The timelines stretched tighter. “But how can it be fine?”

The Doctor’s sleeve brushed against her arm as he stuck his hands into his pockets. “I don’t know, but nothing’s wrong.”

They looked at each other uneasily, then Rose spotted the milkman across the street. “Hiya!” she called out. “Can you tell us what day it is?”

The man looked at them as he climbed out of the truck, and Rose could easily imagine him rolling his eyes at the nonsense question. But one milkman thinking she’d had too many the night before was the last of her concerns, so she waited for the answer.

“Saturday,” he sneered.

“Saturday,” the Doctor repeated. “Good. Good, I like Saturdays.”

When they turned around, Jenny and Donna were standing in the doorway, waiting anxiously.

“Well?” Donna snapped.

“Nothing,” the Doctor said absently as he pushed past them, heading straight for the monitor on the console. “It’s Saturday.”

Donna snorted. “Oh, is that what you discovered? It’s Saturday? I’m so glad it’s not Sunday, or that would blow your “Sundays are always boring” theory out of the water.”

The Doctor rocked back on his heels and pressed his tongue to the back of his teeth. “All right, time for a quick explanation,” he said. “Within the multiverse, there are parallel universes—different Earths with different Donnas who maybe made different choices. And it’s supposed to be impossible
to get from one parallel world to another, but Rose’s friend Mickey is apparently managing it somehow.”

Rose jumped in. “And if he’s made it back here, that means the walls of the worlds are breaking down, which means everything is in danger.”

“But…” Everyone turned to Jenny, who’d been silent through the whole conversation. “Mum, if the parallel worlds are breaking down… does that mean your family can come back?”

Rose couldn’t stop the smile from spreading across her face. “Yeah. I mean… maybe. I hope.”

The idea thrilled her, and she could feel a ramble worthy of the Doctor coming on. Before the words could pour out of her mouth, the TARDIS shook violently, knocking all of them to the floor.

“What the hell was that?” Donna cried out.

“Don’t know,” the Doctor said, his voice a little wheezy. “It came from outside.”

He jumped up and ran to the door while Rose gave Jenny and Donna a hand. The solid wave of shock he projected a moment later had her spinning around to follow him though, and then all four of them were crowded around the door, staring out at open space, littered by asteroids and smaller bits of space debris.

“How can we be in space?” Jenny asked. “The TARDIS didn’t move; I’m sure of it.”

Rose nodded as she ran back to the controls. “I don’t think she did either, but…” Her jaw dropped slightly when she saw the coordinates. “No, she really didn’t.”

The Doctor left Jenny and Donna staring into space and joined her at the monitor. “She must have,” he protested. He ran his hand through his hair when he saw the coordinates. “We haven’t moved. We’re fixed,” he agreed. “It can’t have,” he muttered before running back to the door.

One look out at the surrounding stars and he knew the computer wasn’t lying to them. He could pick out the constellations as well here as he could have if they were stargazing in Britain—because for all intents and purposes, they were.

“No. The TARDIS is still in the same place, but the Earth has gone. The entire planet. It’s gone.”

He rubbed his hand over his face. “First the stars are going out, then an entire planet is just… stolen,” he mumbled as he strode back to the console. “This is just… this doesn’t happen.” His fingers flew over the keyboard as he ran every report he could think of, trying to find an explanation.

Out of the corner of his eye, he watched Donna approach him slowly. “But if the Earth’s been moved,” she began, “they’ve lost the sun. What about my mum? And granddad?” Her voice trembled, and she took a deep breath. “They’re dead, aren’t they? Are they dead?”

Rose stepped in front of Donna and put her hands on her shoulders. “Calm down, Donna,” she said, her voice kind but firm. “We don’t know anything yet. I know that’s scary, but it means there’s a chance—a good chance even—that the worst hasn’t happened.”

Donna sniffed, then set her jaw. “That’s my family. My whole world,” she emphasised.

The Doctor looked at her over the top of the monitor. “I know. I know, and I wish I could tell you something more. But Rose is right. We really don’t know anything for sure yet.”
Jenny pulled Donna into a hug, and Rose joined him at the console. *Anything?* she asked, looking down at the monitor with him.

He tugged on his ear and willed the computer to tell him something that would actually make sense. “There’s no readings,” he said in a low voice. “Nothing. Not a trace. Not even a whisper.” He straightened up and ran his hand through his hair. “Oh, that is fearsome technology,” he muttered.

Rose put her hand on his elbow, grounding him. “So what do we do?”

“We’ve got to get help.” If the Earth was gone and the stars were going out, this might actually be the end of the universe. And he couldn’t fix it without knowing what had happened.

“What kind of help, Dad?”

The Doctor rubbed at the back of his neck and took a deep breath. There was only one place to go, despite his reluctance. “I’m taking you to the Shadow Proclamation. Hold tight.”

He grabbed the lever and pulled, knowing the TARDIS had reached the same conclusion and had set the coordinates for him. As the ship sailed through the Vortex, he held onto the console with one hand and Rose with the other and hoped fervently that the Shadow Proclamation had a better idea of what was going on than he did.

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The air compressed around Mickey, then eased up, letting him come back through to his own universe. He blinked against the inky darkness; as far as they’d been able to tell when they’d set the coordinates, it should have been midday.

Then he looked up at the sky and understood.

The sky that should have been filled with stars and a solitary moon was instead filled with an array of planets of various sizes and colours. It was a stunning picture—he knew Malcolm would love to see something like this—but it also meant he’d gotten here just in time.

He adjusted the hold on his gun and smiled grimly at the horizon. “Game on,” he muttered. Then he walked past a milkman staring at the shattered remains of his cargo, eager to get to the centre of the action.

Ten minutes later, he shook his head as he looked up and down a busy street. When he’d said the centre of action, he hadn’t been thinking of Chiswick High Road. But it was as good a place to start as any, he reckoned as he shifted his gun to hang at his side and started walking.

Alarms pierced the air, but he kept walking. Looting was inevitable in a situation like this, and he needed to get to the Doctor and Rose as quickly as possible. That was the best way to get things back to normal.

A crowd of terrified people ran screaming up the middle of the street. “Yeah, good luck finding a place to hide from that,” Mickey said under his breath, looking up at the sky again.

A car roared down the street on his left, with drunk, frightened idiots hanging out the windows and sunroof, shouting at the audience and the planets in the sky. Mickey shook his head and kept walking, until a drunk staggered out of a pub right in front of him.

“The end of the world, mate,” he said, gesturing vaguely at the sky and the planets and the chaos around them. “End of the stinking world.”
“Yeah?” Mickey nodded, a smirk on his face. “You’d better have another then.”

The sound of shattering glass caught his attention, and he spun around, quickly spotting two hoodies breaking into an electronics shop across the street. “Oh, no you don’t,” he muttered, shifting his hold on his weapon and striding across the street. Stopping a robbery about to happen was different from trying to chase down every hoodlum carrying stolen goods.

The thieves were packing laptops and other equipment into their bags when he reached them. Mickey leaned against the door with one hand resting on his gun.

“Way I see it,” he said casually, hiding a smirk when their heads snapped up, “you’ve got two choices. You can put that stuff down, or you can try your odds against my gun here.”

Their eyes widened, and a second later they bolted past him, out into the street. Mickey chuckled for a second, then he noticed one of the televisions was still on.

“Right,” he said, taking a seat in front of it. “Time to see if anyone has figured out what’s going on yet.”

He watched the news report impatiently. Planets in the sky, spaceships approaching… He was just about to switch it off and see if he couldn’t find a better source of information when the news anchor pressed his finger to his ear, clearly getting a message from his producers.

“Hold on,” he said, listening and nodding. “I’ve just learned that we are receiving a message from the spaceship. We’re going to try to patch it through now. It’s audio only, I understand, but maybe this can tell us something more about who’s done this.”

The breath Mickey was holding whooshed out of him when a familiar, grating cry echoed in the small shop. “Exterminate. Exterminate. Exterminate.”

*Daleks.*

They’d known that whoever was making the stars go out was most likely not an ally of Earth. But there was a difference between suspecting a shadowy enemy was plotting against you, and learning the shadowy enemy was an entire Dalek fleet.

Mickey stepped out of the shop and looked up at the sky, where a Dalek ship had just broken atmosphere. The saucer spun around, letting the weapons array take aim and fire at Chiswick landmarks.

“Daleks,” he said, still hardly able to believe it. How many times had the Doctor and Rose defeated them, wiped them out completely… and yet they still came back.

After a moment, he set his shoulders and walked away. He’d found the right Earth and the right time. Now it was time to find the TARDIS.

{oOoOoOoOo}

“Hold on, Doctor,” Rose said as they tried to stay upright. “I thought the Shadow Proclamation was like… an interstellar treaty or something.”

The Doctor shook his head quickly. “It’s the name of the governing body that wrote and enforces the treaties and agreements.” He grunted when the turbulence sent him into the console. “Posh name for police, really. Outer space police.”
The TARDIS shuddered when she hit the materialisation barrier that protected the Shadow Proclamation from invasion via teleportation, and the Doctor punched the button that would send them through anyway. “Here we go.”

As they materialised, the external monitor flickered on. They’d landed at the end of a long white corridor, so bright it almost looked pale blue. And standing in front of the TARDIS…

“Judoon,” the Doctor groaned, wrinkling his nose at the rhino-faced space thugs.

He jogged around the console and put his coat on, then looked seriously at Rose, Jenny, and Donna. “Judoon have no sense of humour,” he warned. “We’ve broken one of the rules of the Shadow Proclamation by landing without proper clearance.” He pressed his tongue to the back of his teeth. “Well, I say without clearance, but really, I have permanent clearance. But they’ll be testy with us regardless, so just… let me do the talking.”

It was a testament to how grave the situation was that not one of the ladies offered a snarky comment about what typically happened when he did the talking. Instead, Rose came around beside him and put her hand on his shoulder.

“Let’s go save the Earth.”

The trust in her eyes shone just as vibrantly over the bond, and he thanked her silently.

The console room was silent as he swung his coat around his shoulders. Then he drew a deep breath and pulled the door open, stepping out with Rose at his side and Jenny and Donna right behind them. The Judoon immediately primed their weapons, and he and Rose raised their hands so they would see they were unarmed.

The captain, the only Judoon not wearing a helmet, addressed the Doctor directly. “Sco bo tro no flo jo ko fo to to.” Are you the Time Lord?

The Doctor nodded. “No bo ho sho ko ro to so.” He paused, then rattled off the code word that would confirm his identity. “Bokodozogobofopojo.”

Every Judoon lowered their weapon and came to attention. The Doctor relaxed and dropped his hands, then tilted his head down and looked straight into the eyes of the captain, giving a single-word order.

“Moho.”

The guards did an about-face and marched off, and the captain straightened and spoke again, this time in English. “Apologies, Time Lord, but we could not take any chances. I will take you to the Shadow Architect now.”

Rose took the Doctor’s hand again as they fell in step with the Judoon captain, and he glanced over his shoulder to make sure Donna and Jenny were following. Both women nodded once, and he faced front again.

What was that all about? Rose asked.

They’re a bit on edge, the Doctor explained. Understandable really—wouldn’t you be if you were in charge of peace in the universe and a planet went missing? So I had to confirm that we were who we seemed to be, and now they’re taking us to see the Shadow Architect.

The captain led them into the main conference room. Two Judoon stood guard by the door of the
empty room. While they waited for the Shadow Architect to arrive, the Doctor cast a sweeping gaze around the room. It had been remodelled since the last time he’d been there, taking on the same cold, unwelcoming atmosphere as the rest of the complex.

His keen ears heard soft footsteps approaching, and he straightened up as a tall albino woman entered the room. Her black dress and black snood against her pale skin and white hair made her look otherworldly. It was, he knew, a tool she used to keep her opponents off guard.

She sniffed as she paced along the head of the table. “Time Lords are the stuff of legend. They belong in the myths and whispers of the higher species.” She stood still, and the train on her gown fluttered around her ankles. “You cannot possibly exist.”

“Yeah.” The Doctor shoved his hands into his pockets—that pointless posturing reminded him why it had been so long since he’d been back here. “More to the point, I’ve got a missing planet.”

She shook her head, and for the first time, he saw a glimmer of emotion—anger—in her face. “Then you’re not as wise as the stories would say. The picture is far bigger than you imagine. The whole universe is in outrage, Doctor. Twenty-four worlds have been taken from the sky.”

“How many?” The Doctor jogged around the glass table so he could look at the computer terminal on the other end, leaping over a bench that stood in his way. “Which ones? Show me,” he demanded as he put his glasses on.

“Locations range far and wide,” she said, tapping in a command that brought up the list, “but all disappeared at the exact same moment, leaving no trace.”


“Clom’s gone?” Rose said as she joined him. “Who’d want Clom?”

The Architect’s nose thinned. “Who is the female?”

The Doctor wiped his mouth to hide his smirk as he stepped back, letting Rose speak for herself. Rose tilted her head back, and even though she was a good two inches shorter than the Shadow Architect, the proud way she held herself made it look like she was looking down at the other woman—who happened to be one of the most powerful politicians in the universe.

“I’m Rose. Rose Tyler. Other half of the Stuff of Legend.” She looked over her shoulder at the Doctor, an eyebrow arched. “Blimey, they’re a little behind the times around here, aren’t they?”

“Apparently,” the Doctor managed to say without laughing.

Jenny stepped forward and put her hands on the table. “And I’m Jenny Tyler. I’m their daughter.”

“Yeah, I notice you didn’t ask about us.” Anger glinted in Donna’s eyes. “I’m Donna, by the way. I’m a human being. Maybe not the stuff of legend, but every bit as important as Time Lords, thank you.”

The Shadow Architect turned to the Doctor, tight lines etched around her mouth. “You travel with an entourage, Time Lord.”

“Oh, I’m just the chauffeur,” the Doctor said blithely. “Now, tell me about these planets.”

Her nostrils flared, but she nodded and looked back at the monitor. “All different sizes. Some
“populated, some not. But all unconnected.”

“What about Pyrovillia?” Donna asked hesitantly.

The Doctor’s eyes widened. He hadn’t thought of the Pyrovile in months, not even when they were faced with missing planets, once again. He nodded at Donna over the Shadow Architect’s shoulder, and she straightened slightly.

“Way back, when we were in Pompeii, Lucius said Pyrovillia had gone missing.”

“Pyrovillia is cold case,” the Judoon captain grunted. “Not relevant.”

The Doctor and Rose both shivered as they felt timelines buzzing around the room. The Judoon was wrong, but how?

“What’s a cold case?” Jenny asked.

“The planet Pyrovillia cannot be part of this,” the Shadow Architect explained impatiently. “It disappeared over two thousand years ago.”

Rose crossed her arms over her chest and leaned her hip on the table. “That’s not the only missing planet we’ve run into recently though,” she countered. “What about the Adipose breeding planet? Miss Foster said it was lost, and that was why the Adipose royal family hired her to seed Earth.”

“Yeah, but that would have been a long time ago, too,” Donna countered.

“Time! The one missing piece of information that had puzzled the Doctor slid into place. Planets didn’t just go missing. Even if you could move a planet, it would leave a trace—a trail of some kind you could follow. But he’d been unable to track Earth, and obviously the Shadow Proclamation had been unable to track the rest of the worlds.

“That’s it!” He pointed at the ceiling. “Donna, Rose—brilliant.” He looked at the Shadow Architect and explained quickly. “Planets are being taken out of time as well as space.” He adjusted the controls on the computer, asking it to pull up a simulation of the missing worlds. “Let’s put this into 3D.”

So that’s why we couldn’t find Earth? Rose said as holograms of the twenty-four missing worlds appeared over the table. Because it’s out of sync temporally?

He nodded as he quickly added planets to the model. “Now, if we add Pyrovillia and Adipose Three.” It was still just an assortment of planets, though. The Doctor tapped his fingers along the edge of the monitor. “Something missing. Where else, where else, where else?” he whispered. Missing wasn’t the right word, though. “Where else lost, lost, lost, lost?”

The memory clicked. A brilliant young graduate student and her paper that had led to her being on the Midnight tour. “Oh! The Lost Moon of Poosh.” A wave of vindication swept through him as he typed in the name; at least his misadventure on Midnight had had one positive result.

As soon as the 3D model of the Lost Moon of Poosh appeared, the planets shifted. “What did you do?” the Shadow Architect said, a hint of accusation in her voice.

“Nothing.” The Doctor walked into the middle of the projection and looked up at the twenty-seven planets, now acting like cogs in a machine. “The planets rearranged themselves into the optimum pattern. Oh, look at that. Twenty-seven planets in perfect balance. Come on, that is gorgeous.”
“Yeah, it’s beautiful Doctor,” Rose agreed. “But it’s also really bad news, isn’t it?” The Doctor turned to her, and she held his gaze. “Because if these worlds can arrange themselves into a perfect pattern like this, it means they were taken for a purpose. Someone is using Earth, and Woman Wept, and even Clom, to do something.”

*And that's why the stars are going out,* she added silently.

The Doctor nodded, agreeing with both the stated and unstated parts of her theory. “All those worlds fit together like pieces of an engine. It’s like a powerhouse. What for?”

“And the stars are going out,” she added silently.

“Who could design such a thing?” the Shadow Architect asked, not unreasonably. It would take a brilliant scientist to come up with something like this.

The notion triggered a very distant memory in the Doctor’s mind. “Someone tried to move the Earth once before. Long time ago.” He dismissed the thought almost as soon as it occurred to him. Davros was gone—he’d witnessed his destruction at the jaws of the Nightmare Child himself. “Can’t be.”

The Shadow Architect angled her body towards the Doctor, effectively sliding in between Rose and the Doctor. “What is it, Doctor? A new possibility has occurred to you, I can see it in your eyes.”

Rose narrowed her eyes at the woman’s back and was half-tempted to push her way back into the conversation. Then she saw Jenny and Donna standing awkwardly at the other end of the room and changed her mind.

“Well,” she said drily as she joined them, “it seems I’m not quite legendary enough for my input to be sought after. Come on, let’s sit on the steps like the peasants we obviously are.”

Jenny chuckled as they all sat down on the glass staircase. “I think Dad would rather you stayed with him.”

Rose met the Doctor’s gaze and gently redirected his attention back to figuring out what had happened to Earth. That was more important than her pride. She knew he valued her opinion, which mattered more than someone she’d never met before and likely never would meet again.

“Well, it seems I’m not quite legendary enough for my input to be sought after. Come on, let’s sit on the steps like the peasants we obviously are.”

Then she looked at Donna, who very uncharacteristically had not said a word. “Have you tried calling them?” she asked quietly.

Donna nodded. Rose saw her mouth moving, but a sudden swell of music made it impossible for her to focus on what her friend was saying. The song was like the TARDIS, but wilder, more untamed. She’d heard this version before…

“You need sustenance. Take the water, it purifies.”

“Thanks.” Rose took the bowl and noticed that Donna and Jenny had already been served.

“It is almost time,” the girl said. “The wolf will howl again.”

Rose froze, then slowly lowered the bowl and looked up at the servant. “How do you know that?” she asked, her voice low and hoarse.
The albino’s red eyes seemed to stare right through her. “It must be you, no matter what he says.”

Then she bowed suddenly and scurried away.

“What was *that*?” Donna asked once they were alone.

Time swirled around Rose, and for a moment, she was in the TARDIS again, wearing this coat but with her hair down. The console room was on fire and sparks fell around her as she hung onto the jump seat for dear life.

The Doctor was suddenly in front her, crouching down so he could look into her eyes without her having to crane her neck up. “All right, love?” he asked quietly.

Rose nodded. Like the vision on Shan Shen, the details vanished as soon as she was pulled back to the present. “Just timelines.” She took his hand and squeezed, and after a moment, he squeezed back.

The Doctor shifted and sat down beside them, looking over at Donna. “Donna, help me out. Was there anything unusual happening on Earth before you left with us? Electrical storms, freak weather, patterns in the sky?”

“Well, how should I know?” Donna snapped, then she took a deep breath and wiped a tear from her eye. “Um, no. I don’t think so, no.”

“Oh, okay, never mind.” The Doctor sighed and stood back up.

“Although, there were the bees disappearing,” Donna said as he started down the stairs.

In the arch of the Doctor’s eyebrow, Rose could see the rude dismissal forming on the tip of his tongue. She shook her head quickly. *Be gentle. Her whole family…*

The Doctor pressed his lips together, and then said, “Right… the bees disappearing. You mentioned that…” His eyes widened suddenly. “The bees disappearing!” he crowed as he spun around and ran back to the computer terminal.

Rose, Jenny, and Donna exchanged a look, then all three of them jumped to their feet and followed him. They knew that victorious cry too well.

“How is that significant?” the Shadow Architect demanded.

“Bees are this Earth insect,” Rose explained.

“Yeah, and they’ve been disappearing,” Donna continued. “Some people said it was pollution or mobile phone signals.”

“Or,” the Doctor said as he typed feverishly, “they were going back home.”

“Back home where?” Donna asked.

“Planet Melissa Majoria.”

“Wait.” Jenny held her hand up, and her eyes glowed with excitement. “Are you saying Earth has alien insects?”

The Doctor grinned up at her, then looked back at the monitor. “Yup! Not all bees are aliens, but if the migrant bees felt something coming, some sort of danger, and escaped? Tandocca,” he declared, pointing up at the Shadow Architect.
“The Tandocca Scale,” she said, finally sounding a little bit impressed.

For once, the Doctor explained without being asked. “Tandocca Scale is the series of wavelengths used as a carrier signals by migrant bees. Infinitely small. No wonder we didn’t see it. It’s like looking for a speck of cinnamon in the Sahara, but look, there it is.” He pointed at the screen, where a trail of tiny specks was following a large dot. “The Tandocca trail. The transmat that moved the planets was using the same wavelength—we can follow the path.”

Donna spun around and started running back to the TARDIS. “And find the Earth?” she called out over her shoulder. “Well, stop talking and do it.”

“I am!” he shouted at her back.

The Doctor, Rose, and Jenny all ran after Donna. The TARDIS had unlocked her door and they piled into the console room. Rose stood guard by the door they left ajar, while the Doctor ran straight for the computer terminal.

_Come on, old girl. We can do it. Twenty-seven planets are counting on us today._

“We’re a bit late,” he warned as he shifted the wavelength the scanner was tracking. He held his breath as the TARDIS searched, not letting it out until the trail appeared on the monitor. “The signal’s scattered, but it’s a start.”

He ran back down the ramp and stuck his head out the door. “I’ve got a blip,” he told the Shadow Architect, who’d followed them back to the TARDIS with Judoon in tow. “It’s just a blip, but it’s definitely a blip.”

Her eyes glittered in excitement. “Then according to the strictures of the Shadow Proclamation, I will have to seize your transport and your technology.”

Rose took half a step towards the open door, but the Doctor reached for her shoulder and squeezed. _I know you want to burst through the doors and take her down a few pegs, _he told Rose while they waited for an answer, _but we don’t have time. Can you get the TARDIS ready to leave?_

She sighed, but a moment later, he heard her behind him, adjusting the controls so the ship would follow the trail they’d picked up. Confident that they’d be ready to leave momentarily, he looked at the Architect. “Oh, really? What for?”

The Shadow Architect and her Judoon guards were none the wiser to the private conversation. “The planets were stolen with hostile intent,” she said, lifting her chin defiantly. “We are declaring war, Doctor, right across the universe, and you will lead us into battle.”

_You were right, Rose—their files are definitely out of date and inaccurate. Not even UNIT would try to get me to use the TARDIS as a weapon._

“Right,” he said out loud. “Yes. Course I will. I’ll just go and get you the key.”

He slid back into the ship and softly closed the door, then tossed his coat over a strut as Rose hit the dematerialisation lever.

“Let’s go find some missing planets,” he said as he raced up the ramp to join her.

_oOoOoOoOo_

Mickey tried Rose’s number for the twentieth time, but once again it went straight to voicemail.
“Where are you, babe?” he muttered as he crept through the streets of Chiswick.

If you’d told him that one day, he would be ducking and hiding as he ran down a quiet residential street in Chiswick of all places, he would have laughed in your face. But he’d just barely managed to avoid a Dalek patrol, and he definitely did not want to be caught.

“Halt. You will come with me.”

Mickey froze, then slowly snuck forward. The Dalek was just around the corner, and it sounded like it might be alone. He could handle one on its own.

“Will I heck,” a man growled, and then Mickey heard a splat that sounded like a paint ball hitting something.

“My vision is not impaired,” the Dalek said.

“I warned you, Dad,” a tearful woman said.

“Hostility will not be tolerated.”

Mickey set his jaw. That was his cue. He gripped his gun tighter, and as the Dalek started crying, “Exterminate,” he wheeled around the corner and shot its head off.

On the other side of the smoking Dalek remains, an elderly man blinked up at him. “Do you want to swap?” he asked, holding up what was indeed a paint gun.

Mickey chuckled. “Nah, I’m good, mate,” he said. Then he looked sternly at the man and his daughter. “Listen to me, both of you. Go back home and lay low. Daleks don’t take resistance kindly. We’re hopefully going to get rid of them, but until we do, you cannot draw attention to yourselves. Got it?”

The woman nodded fiercely, then tugged the man down the street. “Come on, Dad,” Mickey heard her say as they jogged off. “I don’t want to die tonight.”

Mickey shook his head as they left, then he looked at the Dalek remains. Seeing it up close and personal brought back memories of working at the Torchwood in this universe, and the last time he’d seen the Doctor and Rose.

_Torchwood._ Suddenly, he knew where he needed to go. It was time to get help from an old friend.

_oOoOoOoOo_

The TARDIS’ wheezing slowed as she took them out of the Vortex back into space. The time rotor pumped up and down a few more times, then stopped with a jaw-rattling thud. Rose and the Doctor looked at the monitor, then frowned at each other; there were no planets anywhere nearby at all. Certainly not twenty-seven of them.

“It’s stopped,” the Doctor said. He twisted a dial, but the ship remained where she was. The trail ended here.

“What do you mean?” Donna moved around the console to look at the monitor with them. “Is that good or bad? Where are we?”

“The Medusa Cascade.” He hit a button on the monitor and the computer report detailing their location was replaced by the feed from the external video. Donna sucked in a breath at the glorious
cloud of colours, and Jenny came up on his other side to see it.

“Oh, it’s beautiful!” she whispered, touching the monitor where navy blue faded into brilliant violet. “It reminds me of the painting hanging over your bed,” she added.

The Doctor and Rose exchanged a smile, remembering the last time they’d seen this wonder of the universe. “Yeah, that painting is a picture of the view of the Medusa Cascade from a nearby planet,” he told Jenny. “We’ve been here before. Well.” He tugged on his ear. “I’ve been here a few times. Back when I was a kid, it was the centre of a rift in time and space.”

Jenny nodded, then bit her lip and peered more closely at the monitor. “But… I don’t see any planets,” she said after a moment.

The Doctor sighed and stuck his hands in his trouser pockets. “We followed the Tandocca Trail, but it stops dead. End of the line.”

They were close; he could feel it. He just needed a bit of time to figure out how to actually find the planets.

Donna’s eyes widened and she shook her head. “So what do we do?” She looked at the monitor, then back at him. “Doctor, what do we do?”

Rose stepped around the Doctor to grab Donna by the shoulders. “Donna, listen,” she said, making her voice as gentle as possible. “We are going to find the Earth, do you hear me? We will find your mum and granddad. But you need to calm down, all right?”

“But how?” Donna asked, a hysterical edge in her voice. “I’ve tried… I’ve tried calling, and no one answers. And…” She swallowed. “This was our one chance, and it didn’t work. The planets aren’t there. They aren’t anywhere.”

Rose shook Donna gently. “Do you remember UNIT? Maybe you can’t get through, and maybe Wilf can’t call you, but our friends on Earth will be trying to reach us, and they have better technology than your basic mobile phone.” She opened a drawer and pulled out her phone. “We just need to wait for them to find us.”

**Chapter End Notes**

If you're reading any of my other WIP stories, they are all on hiatus at the moment. I hope to be able to come back to them before too long, but I desperately need a break. This story will continue with weekly updates as planned.
Just a Phone Call Away

There was one very important call Mickey had to make before he could ask control for the shift he wanted. He switched the radio to the private frequency designated for use between himself and Pete.

“Tin Dog to Gemini,” he whispered. “Gemini, come in.”

“This is Gemini,” Pete answered only seconds later. “Have you located the target, Tin Dog?”

“Negative, Gemini. I’m going to T3 to get help from Captain Jack, but I wanted to give you an update first.”

“Understood. Sitrep?”

Mickey looked up at the sky, filled with planets and Dalek ships. He heard a Dalek rolling down the street and ducked behind a trash bin, waiting for it to pass before he answered.

“Not good, Boss. We’ve got Daleks on the ground.”

He heard his boss suck in a breath. Pete had the same nightmares of Daleks and their grating voices as he did. “Understood. Do you need backup before you find the TARDIS?”

“No. Hold your position until you get the all clear from me. As soon as I find the TARDIS, I’ll turn the beacon on so your hopper will lock onto me.”

“Roger that. Gemini out.”

After ending the radio conversation with Pete, Mickey changed it back to the all-comms channel. “Agent Smith calling control. Come in, control.”

He winced when a buzz of static came over the radio first, followed by a voice. “This is control. Go ahead, Agent Smith.”

“Can you lock me onto Torchwood Three in this universe?” he asked. “Straight into their Hub.”

He waited, hearing the faint sound of keys clicking. “Locked and ready for transport.”

Mickey shifted his weapon so it was at his back, hopefully making himself look non-threatening enough that Jack and his team wouldn’t shoot him on sight. “Go.”

Using the dimension cannon as a teleport was a hell of a lot more comfortable than flying through the Void—and a lot faster, too. He held up his hands as he felt himself appear in the Hub.

“Don’t shoot!” he called out.

“What the…” Jack was sitting on the floor ten feet away from where Mickey had materialised, but he jumped to his feet when he heard the new voice. His eyes widened when he saw who had joined them. “Well, if it isn’t Mickey Mouse!”

Mickey grinned at his friend, relieved that he’d made it and avoided being shot. “You can talk, Captain Cheesecake!”

Jack laughed and swept him into a hug. “It’s good to see you—and that’s Beefcake.”
Mickey groaned and pushed away from Jack just as another man cleared his throat. He looked over Jack’s shoulder to find a surprisingly familiar face. “Well, the parallel version of Ianto Jones,” he said, feeling a little off-balance. Even after five years, meeting a parallel version of someone he knew in a different universe threw him.

A perplexed look crossed the Welshman’s face. “You seem to be implying that you’re from a parallel universe, but multiversal theory suggests that if other universes exist, they are completely separate from each other.”

Mickey snorted. “Definitely parallel Ianto. Yeah, that’s the way it’s supposed to be, but when reality starts to fall apart, well, apparently the walls between the universes are the first things to go.”

Jack stepped back and gestured between the two men. “Ianto Jones, meet Mickey Smith. Mickey and I go way back, to my days before Torchwood.”

A string of beeps interrupted the conversation, and then they all heard another voice echo through the Hub, this time coming from the computer monitor.

“This message is of the utmost importance. We haven’t much time... Can anyone hear me?”

A woman Mickey didn’t recognise came out of a dimly-lit alcove and walked to a computer terminal. “Someone’s trying to get in touch.”

“Yeah, and I know that voice,” Mickey said as they all moved closer to the computer.

Harriet Jones held up her ID. “Harriet Jones, former Prime Minister.”

“Yeah, I know who you are,” Mickey and Jack said in unison.

Behind them, Ianto and the woman were whispering to each other, asking how this was even possible. Mickey didn’t have a clue, honestly, but this was the first bit of hope he’d had since he’d heard the Daleks.

The screen went back to static for a moment, then it focused again, only this time it was split into four quarters—one for Harriet, one for Torchwood, one for Sarah Jane Smith, and a fourth that was still static.

“The fourth contact seems to be having some trouble getting through,” Harriet said. “I’ll just boost the signal.”

They waited anxiously, and Mickey blinked a moment later when a gorgeous woman appeared in the fourth quadrant.

“Hello?”

Jack laughed and rocked back on his heels. “Martha Jones. Martha, where are you?”

Martha shifted in her chair. “I guess Project Indigo was more clever than we thought. One second I was in Manhattan, next second…” She gestured at her surroundings. “Maybe Indigo tapped into my mind, because I ended up in the one place that I wanted to be.”

An older woman entered the frame and wrapped her arm around Martha’s neck. “You came home. At the end of the world, you came back to me.”

Marta smiled at the woman Mickey assumed must be her mum, then turned back to the screen. “But
then all of a sudden, it’s like the laptop turned itself on.”

“It did,” Harriet confirmed. “That was me. Harriet Jones, former Prime Minister.”

Mickey covered his mouth to hide his laughter. Harriet never had quite gotten used to the idea that people knew who she was.

Humour lit up Martha’s dark eyes, and the shared amusement drew Mickey to her. “Yes, I know who you are,” she said.

“I thought it was about time we all met, given the current crisis. Torchwood, this is Sarah Jane Smith.”

Mickey grinned. “Oh, me and Sarah Jane go way back.”

Sarah Jane smiled. “Not just a tin dog any more, Mickey Smith.” She raised an eyebrow. “But Rose and the Doctor told me you were in a parallel universe.”

Mickey nodded. “Past tense. I came back to find them when the stars started going out.”

“That’s what we are all here for,” Harriet interrupted. “Though I admit I didn’t expect to find you, Mickey.” She redirected the conversation back to the introductions. “Mickey Smith, friend of Rose Tyler and defender of the Earth at the Battle of Canary Wharf.”

“Rose told me a little about you,” Martha said. “I’m Martha Jones. I travelled with them for about a year.” Her gaze shifted away from him. “But how did you find me?” she asked Harriet.

Harriet smiled. “This, ladies and gentlemen, this is the Subwave Network. A sentient piece of software programmed to seek out anyone and everyone who can help to contact the Doctor and Rose Tyler.”

Fear sliced through Martha. There were Daleks everywhere, certainly monitoring Earth’s communications. Harriet had put a target on all their backs by drawing them together.

Her mum stood up, and Martha leaned forward to whisper into the mic. “What if the Daleks can hear us?”

Harriet shook her head, an eager smile on her face. “No, that’s the beauty of the Subwave. It’s undetectable.”

“And you invented it?” Sarah Jane asked.

“I developed it,” Harriet corrected. “It was created by the Mr. Copper Foundation.”

“Mr. Copper, huh?”

Martha looked at Jack, who was rubbing his jaw.

“I’ll have to tell the Doctor that he kept his word.” Then his expression turned serious. “But what we need right now is a weapon. Martha, back there at UNIT, what, what did they give you? What was that key thing?”

Martha swallowed and held the disk up. She knew at least Harriet would know what the Osterhagen key was; she didn’t know what her opinion of it would be. “The Osterhagen key.”

She found out Harriet’s opinion quickly enough. “That key is not to be used, Dr. Jones. Not under
any circumstances.”

“But what is an Osterhagen key?” Jack pressed.

Martha started to answer, but Harriet interrupted. “Forget about the key, and that’s an order. All we need is the Doctor.”

Mickey raised an eyebrow. “Bit backwards, innit, you tracking down the Doctor? After all, he was the one to depose you. I was there, remember?”

Martha gladly accepted the cup of tea her mum brought out and studied Rose’s Mickey. The easy confidence in the way he talked to Harriet didn’t match the stories Rose had told of their growing up years, but she guessed time had changed them both.

Harriet pressed her lips together and nodded once. “Yes you were, Mr. Smith. And I’ve wondered about that for a long time, whether I was wrong. But I stand by my actions to this day, because I knew, I knew that one day, the Earth would be in danger, and the Doctor would fail to appear. I told him so myself, and he didn’t listen.”

The way Harriet framed the Doctor’s actions sounded so unfair to Martha. She didn’t know what the former Prime Minister had done that had led the Doctor to depose her, but she knew he wasn’t staying away today because he just didn’t care.

“But I’ve been trying to find him,” she countered. “I’ve been calling Rose, but I keep getting sent straight to voicemail. And her phone is never outside of range, so there’s definitely something blocking the call.”

Mickey held up a phone of his own. “Yeah, I’m not getting through either,” he agreed. He looked like he wanted to say more, maybe about what Harriet had done before, but after a second of hesitation, he clamped his jaw together and shook his head.

“That’s why we need the Subwave,” Harriet said. “To bring us all together. Combine forces. The Doctor’s secret army.”

And then Martha understood. Because if Harriet didn’t understand the Doctor well enough to know he would never want an army, their falling-out made perfect sense.

Jack’s voice pulled her back to the present. “Wait a minute.” Jack turned and looked at Gwen. “We boost the signal. That’s it. We transmit that telephone number through Torchwood itself, using all the power of the rift…”

“And we’ve got Mr. Smith,” chimed in the teenager standing with Sarah Jane. “He can link up with every telephone exchange on the Earth. He can get the whole world to call the same number, all at the same time. Billions of phones, calling out all at once.”

Jack cackled. “Brilliant. Who’s the kid?”

“That’s my son,” Sarah Jane said proudly.

“Excuse me. Sorry. Sorry. Hello.” Ianto pushed his way past the other Torchwood employees to address Harriet directly. “Ianto Jones. Er, if we start transmitting, then this Subwave Network is going to become visible. I mean, to the Daleks.”

“Yes.” Harriet nodded. “And they’ll trace it back to me. But my life doesn’t matter. Not if it saves the Earth.”
Jack straightened to attention and snapped a salute. “Ma’am.”

“Thank you, Captain.” Martha marvelled as not even a smile cracked Harriet’s stoic demeanour. “But there are people out there dying on the streets. Now, enough of words. Let’s begin.”

Mickey watched Jack and his team jump to action, getting Torchwood ready to transmit a billion phone calls all at once. Jack typed a command into a computer terminal, then leapt back and spun around. “Rift power activated,” he called out.

“All terminals coordinated,” Gwen replied from another computer.

Then she jogged over to a storage bin Ianto had opened. Together, they pulled out a thick cable, which Ianto carried over to the tall column that gave them access to the national grid.

The cable sparked when he plugged it into an open port, and the familiar ‘whoosh’ of electricity slowing down echoed around the hub. “National grid online,” Ianto said. “Giving you everything we’ve got.”

Mickey turned back to the computer screen connecting them with the rest of the Doctor and Rose’s friends. “Sarah Jane, I’ve got Rose’s number when you’re ready.”

She smiled and shook her head. “Thank you, Mickey, but I’ve got her number myself and I’ve already given it to Mr. Smith.”

Mickey blinked. He’d imagined Rose and the Doctor flying around in the TARDIS without any real connection to Earth, but looking around at the group of people all working to help them, that didn’t seem to be the case. He shrugged and stepped back to watch the action. Sarah Jane and her son were talking to Mr. Smith, which was apparently some kind of computer.

“Opening Subwave Network to maximum,” Harriet said.

Sarah Jane stepped back from her computer and pressed her hands together, palm to palm. “Mr. Smith, make that call.”

“Calling Rose Tyler,” a computer voice replied.

“And sending.” Jack turned a dial, and a pulse of energy went up the column, through the ceiling of the Hub where Mickey knew it would continue resonating through the Water Tower, transmitting through the rift itself.

“And now we wait,” he muttered.

Twenty minutes had passed since Rose had declared that they only had to wait for someone to call them. For the first few minutes, they’d all stared at the phone, sitting on the console, and willed it to ring. Finally, Donna had slumped in dejection and gone around to sit on the stairs. Jenny had joined her, and the Doctor and Rose were on the jump seat.

Rose’s head ached, and she couldn’t tell if it was the constant awareness of time swirling around them, or if her ponytail was a bit too tight. She let her hair down and sighed when the pressure on the back of her scalp disappeared.

The Doctor combed his fingers through her hair, massaging away the sore spots. Are you sure they’re going to call us? he asked as he worked.
Martha called us for the Sontarans, she reminded him as she leaned into his touch. Do you really think she won’t call us for Daleks?

I didn’t think of that.

That’s why you have me. Rose winked at him, then took the strands of hair that liked to fall in her face and clipped them back with a barrette. Her head didn’t ache anymore, but the timelines were still distracting. It was almost…

Her phone rang, the cheerful ringtone bouncing around the cavernous console room while the vibrations had it dancing perilously close to the edge of the console.

“Phone!” the Doctor shouted, scrambling for it and pressing the accept call button. “Martha, is that you?” But instead of a voice, he just heard three beeps, over and over. He recognised it right away—a homing beacon. “It’s a signal.”

Donna looked from the phone to his face. “Can we follow it?”

The Doctor pulled out his stethoscope and pressed the bell to the phone, listening for the signal. “Oh, just watch me.”

Come on come on come on, he begged, not knowing if he was talking to the TARDIS or the universe at large. Timelines were tightening around them, making him itch with the need to do something. And Rose seemed to be sensing something he couldn’t see, which made him even more nervous than usual.

For once, the universe seemed to be listening, because it was only a minute later that he got a solid fix on the signal and was able to punch the coordinates the signal originated from into the TARDIS.

“Got it. Locking on.”

oOoOoOoOo

Jack couldn’t be sure, but the plan seemed to be working. At least, Torchwood’s part was. The power was going out along the rift, just like they’d discussed, and carried in the transmission were millions of phone calls, all trying to find the TARDIS.

He didn’t say it out loud, but the universe must have known he’d mentally broken the rule to avoid any thoughts like, “What could possibly go wrong?” Because just when he dared to feel optimistic about their success, Gwen spoke up.

“Harriet, a saucer’s locked on to your location. They’ve found you.”

“I know. I’m using the Network to mask your transmission. Keep going.”

“Exterminate.”

Everyone winced when they heard the sound of an explosion and shattering glass come over the network. Then they swallowed and worked harder.

“Captain, I’m transferring the Subwave Network to Torchwood,” Harriet said, her voice still absolutely calm. “You’re in charge now. And tell the Doctor from me—he chose his companions well. It’s been an honour.” Jack swallowed hard and offered another salute.

Harriet nodded, then stood up and moved out of range of the camera. In the background, Jack could
hear the electric hum of Daleks moving into the house. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Mickey reach automatically for the powerful weapon he had strapped to his chest, even though it wouldn’t do Harriet any good.

“Harriet Jones. Former Prime Minister.”

“Yes, we know who you are,” a Dalek replied.

“Oh, you know nothing of any human, and that will be your downfall.”

“Exterminate.”

Jack flinched and tried to ignore the way the top left quadrant of the screen went dark. “All right people, look lively,” he ordered. “Let’s make her proud.”

She was Harriet Jones, former prime minister. He knew who she was, and he would make sure everyone knew what she’d done.

The TARDIS shuddered and rocked as she followed the signal through the Vortex. When a bit of electrical wiring came loose and sparked a fire, Rose frowned—seeing the console room on fire seemed familiar, somehow. She shook her head and grabbed a fire extinguisher, putting it out and soothing the ship as she went.

The Doctor was watching their progress on the monitor by the navigation panel, and once the flames were under control, Rose joined him. “Where is she taking us?”

“We’re travelling through time,” he hollered over bangs and crashes as more wiring came loose. “One second in the future. The phone call’s pulling us through. Three, two, one.”

Rose watched the external monitor as they followed the signal forward through time. As they got closer, the planets appeared, one by one, until they were in the centre of the arrangement they’d seen at the Shadow Proclamation.

Everyone took a deep breath when the ship stopped rattling, then Jenny jogged over to look over her shoulder. “Twenty-seven planets. We did it!”

Donna was the last to join them. She brightened when she spotted the familiar blue-and-green sphere on the monitor. “And there’s the Earth. But why couldn’t we see them?”

“The entire Medusa Cascade has been put a second out of sync with the rest of the universe,” the Doctor explained. “Perfect hiding place. Tiny little pocket of time. But we found them.”

Feedback squealed and crackled over the monitor, and they all turned around to look at the computer terminal again. “Ooo, ooo, ooo, what’s that?” The Doctor turned a dial slowly. “Hold on, hold on. Some sort of subwave network.”

A moment later, the screen split into four quadrants. They were in the top left corner, with Jack and Mickey in the top right next to them. As soon as the picture resolved, Jack started yelling. “Where the hell have you been? Doctor, it’s the Daleks.”

Rose pointed at the screen. “Look, Doctor. It’s Mickey, just like I told you.”

He waved. “Hey, babe. Long time no see. I’ll explain everything properly when we’re actually
“Right,” the Doctor agreed. “So tell me what’s going on.”

“It’s the Daleks,” Sarah Jane said, echoing Jack. “They’re taking people to their spaceship.”

“It’s not just Dalek Caan,” Martha added.

The Doctor looked at his friends proudly. “Sarah Jane… Who’s that boy?” he muttered, pointing at the teenager standing with Sarah. He moved onto the next group, Jack and his friends. “That must be Torchwood. Oh, they’re brilliant. Look at you all, you clever people.”

“That’s Martha,” Donna said, pointing to the bottom right corner. “And who’s he?” she asked, pointing to the Torchwood frame.

Rose laughed. “That’s Jack.”

Jack leaned towards the monitor, a welcoming grin on his face. “Captain Jack Harkness. I look forward to meeting you face to face, Ginger.”

The Doctor groaned and scrubbed his hands over his face. “Don’t. Just don’t.”

Jack opened his mouth, but before he could protest, like always, that he was just saying hello, the screen went blank. The Doctor reached automatically for the dial, trying to bring it back. A second later, he realised what was happening. “Oh.”

“What happened?” Jenny asked.

He frowned and pounded on the top of the monitor. “There’s another signal coming through. There’s someone else out there. Hello? Can you hear me?”

He was expecting another old friend, the Brig maybe. But the voice that came over the Subwave Network was a gravelly one the Doctor hadn’t heard in centuries. The Doctor stumbled back in shock and reached blindly for Rose’s hand.

“Your voice is different, and yet its arrogance is unchanged.”

Rose took his hand as the static faded into a dark screen. A blue light slowly moved closer to them, and finally, they saw a withered man, sitting in a wheelchair that looked like the bottom half of a Dalek.

“Welcome to my new Empire, Doctor. It is only fitting that you should bear witness to the resurrection and the triumph of Davros, lord and creator of the Dalek race.”

“Oh, my God,” Rose mumbled. She’d seen Davros in the Doctor’s memories, but he was supposed to be dead. How could he be here? The Doctor squeezed her hand painfully, but she didn’t flinch.

“Dad?” Jenny whispered.

Rose looked up at their daughter and quickly shook her head, urging her to stay off screen. She didn’t know if it would be possible to conceal her existence from the Daleks, but she was bloody well going to try.

“Have you nothing to say?” Davros taunted.

Rose moved to stand directly behind the Doctor, putting one hand on his shoulder and looking at the
nightmare face on the screen as she tried to reassure her bond mate.

*We’re all safe right now, in the TARDIS, she reminded him. I know how horrible it is to see him again, but this is just a message.*

That seemed to shake the Doctor out of his stupor. “But you were destroyed. In the very first year of the Time War, at the Gates of Elysium. I saw your command ship fly into the jaws of the Nightmare Child. I tried to save you.”

“But it took one stronger than you,” Davros gloated. “Dalek Caan himself.”

The camera panned over to reveal an open Dalek casing chained to the floor. Tentacles waved as Dalek Caan sang his story to them. “I flew into the wild and fire. I danced and died a thousand times.”

The camera focused back on Davros. “Emergency Temporal Shift took him back into the Time War itself.”

“But that’s impossible,” the Doctor argued. “The entire War is timelocked.”

“And yet he succeeded.” Davros cackled. “Oh, it cost him his mind, but imagine. A single, simple Dalek succeeded where Emperors and Time Lords have failed. A testament, don’t you think, to my remarkable creations?”

“And you made a new race of Daleks,” the Doctor spat out.

“I gave myself to them, quite literally. Each one grown from a cell of my own body.” Davros pulled back his tunic to reveal his bare skeleton, free of flesh.

Rose shuddered when she realised what he meant, but at the same time, she felt a timeline slip into place. This was important, somehow—the fact that the Daleks were identical genetically. She filed the information away and listened to the rest of Davros’ speech.

“New Daleks. True Daleks. I have my children, Doctor. What do you have, now?”

The Doctor’s anger and pain burned brightly, and Rose didn’t try to stop him. Not yet.

“After all this time, everything we saw, everything we lost, I have only one thing to say to you.”

He slowly reached for something on his right, and when Rose realised what he was doing, she grabbed onto the console.

“Bye!” the Doctor shouted as he threw the dematerialisation lever.

The TARDIS spun through the Medusa Cascade, dancing around the planets until she came to the Earth. And on Earth, there was one place she liked to land best, one city that felt the most like home.

“Doctor, Dalek Caan,” Rose whispered as the TARDIS locked onto London. “The last time we saw him, I said… I said he was falling through time. And that it would cost him his mind.”

“I know,” the Doctor bit out. He sighed and pinched his nose. “I know, Rose.”

“But how did I know?”

The Doctor pulled her close. “Does it really matter? You were right. You… you saw this, somehow. And you were right.”
They say you never hear anything good when you eavesdrop, and listening in on the conversation between the Doctor and the creator of the Daleks certainly didn’t make Jack happy. He’d overheard Sarah Jane’s whispered pleas too—whoever this guy was, his presence was clearly not good news.

The audio cut out when the Doctor shouted his final goodbye at his old adversary, but Jack knew the signal was still transmitting, putting a target on Torchwood’s back. If he was going to get to the Doctor and be any help at all, he had to get out of there before the Daleks found them.

In the eerie silence that filled the Hub, Jack swung his coat around his shoulders and pulled his Vortex Manipulator out of the drawer he’d stashed it in. It had been hard to keep his promise to the Doctor over the last year and not use it to fix every little thing. But right now? Having a teleport? This was why the Doctor had left it operational.

“Jack!”

He spun around and looked at Ianto as he strapped the wristband on.

“Dalek saucer heading for the bay. They’ve found us.”

Jack swallowed hard, but before he could answer, his phone rang. He flipped it open after a quick glance at the caller ID. “What do you need, Martha?”

Martha exhaled loudly in his ear. “Jack. You’ve got a teleport. Can you tell me anything about how it works? I need to use Project Indigo, and I can’t keep hoping it’ll just read my mind.”

Jack nodded. “Open it up. Lift the central panel; there’s a string of numbers that keep changing, right?”

“Yes. And we could work out some of them, but the fourth one over…”

“It keeps oscillating between two numbers.” He looked at his device as he set the coordinates for London. “Should be a four and a nine.”

“Yes!”

“That’s the teleport base code.” He heard her take a sharp breath. “You know how to work it now, don’t you?”

“Yeah, thank you Jack. And good luck.”

“Good luck, Martha Jones.” Jack snapped his phone shut and slid it back into his pocket.

Jack looked at Mickey as he locked his coordinates, making sure nothing could pull him off course. “I’d offer you a ride, Mickey, but something tells me you’ve got your own transportation.”

Mickey nodded. He was already pulling a radio from his belt. “Control, this is Agent Smith. Can you lock onto the TARDIS?”

“Locking onto the TARDIS now, Agent Smith. Good luck.”

“Thanks. And tell Pete I’m turning the beacon on.” Mickey saluted to Jack, then pressed a small button on his waist and disappeared.

Jack took a deep breath and looked back at his team. He couldn’t shake the feeling that he was
abandoning them, even though he didn’t really have a choice.

“Look, I know the Daleks will be here any minute, but I swear I’m not running away,” he told them. “I’ve got to find the Doctor, but I’m coming back.”

Gwen handed him the most powerful hand-held weapon they had. “Don’t worry about us. Just go.”

“We’ll be fine,” Ianto promised.

Jack winked at him. “You’d better be.” He pressed the button on his teleport, then slung the gun around so he was ready to use it as soon as he landed. A moment later, the Hub disappeared and he was on a London street.

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“Jackie!”

Jackie froze for a moment, then took a deep breath and turned around slowly. She could hear Pete running up the steps, and she kissed the top of Tony’s head while they waited for him to reach them.

The door to the nursery burst open, and he peered inside. “I just got the call. Mickey’s found the TARDIS, and I’m going through to help him.”

He held out his hands, and Jackie set Tony down and let Pete pull her in for a hug. “It’s almost time, love,” he whispered in her ear. “Keep the radio nearby so you hear me call when it’s safe to come through.”

She was glad he couldn’t see her face, because she couldn’t help but roll her eyes at the ridiculous notion that she was just going to sit around and wait. She turned her face into his shoulder and nodded.

“I will,” she lied.

Pete kissed her temple, then let her go and scooped Tony up in his arms. Jackie pressed her lips together to hold back tears as he said goodbye to their son. Whatever was happening on the other side of the Void, they both knew Pete might not come back. It was possible he might never see Tony again—no, that they might never see Tony again.

Which is why I have to go, she reminded herself as Pete reluctantly set Tony down. I’ve got two children whose lives are at stake. I can’t just sit here and wait for someone else to save us.

Pete kissed her quickly, then jogged away from the room as if he were afraid he would lose the will to leave if he didn’t move fast.

Jackie picked Tony up as soon as Pete was gone and cuddled him while she paged the nanny. He squirmed in her arms, not appreciating being held when he’d been playing with his trains.

“Wanna play, Mummy!” he finally insisted, kicking his legs slightly.

Jackie pressed a kiss to the top of his head, then put him down just as the nanny entered the room. “Ah, good. You’re here,” she said, walking towards the door. “I have some shopping to do in town. I don’t know how long it will take; I might eat dinner out, depending on how late it gets.”

Ella nodded. “Will I need to feed Tony and put him down tonight?”

“You might. Pete has an important meeting with a few Torchwood officers, so who knows when
he’ll be home.”

Ella got down on the floor and started playing with Tony. “Not a problem, Jackie;” she said easily. “Me and Tony will have plenty of fun, won’t we kiddo?” She set up an extra length of track, and Tony cheered and sent his train over it. “Say goodbye to Mummy.”

Tony shot her a bright smile and waved with his free hand. “Bye, Mummy!”

Jackie spun around and left the room before she could burst into tears or change her mind. Her and Pete’s room was next door, and she grabbed a denim jacket before going to Pete’s office.

She trod cautiously, uncertain if he’d left already. If he caught her, he would definitely try to talk her out of her plan.

But the room was empty. Jackie reached into the still-open desk drawer and pulled out the second hopper. For the second time in her life, the yellow button was draped around her neck. She took a deep breath and pressed the button, and the mansion disappeared around her.

Pete landed in the prime universe, poised in a crouch. He hadn’t done much travelling with the hoppers before the Cybermen and the Daleks, but he knew a lower centre of gravity lessened the chances of toppling over.

He blinked into the darkness and adjusted the hold on his weapon. Mickey hadn’t mentioned it was night when they’d talked on the phone. He glanced up at the sky and swore softly; it wasn’t night. There was just no sun to shine its light onto the planet.

The beacon on his hopper flashed, and he knew he was less than a mile away from the TARDIS. He nodded once and started jogging, but he’d only gone a few steps when he heard the whoosh and pop of another hopper.

Pete knew who it was without turning around. “You couldn’t just wait, could you?” he said, resignation his first reaction. “No, of course you couldn’t. You couldn’t trust us to take care of this for you.”

“Well if you’re going to lecture me, at least do me the courtesy of looking at me.”

He turned around slowly and looked at his wife. She was wearing a denim jacket over her shirt, and he realised she must have been ready and waiting to follow after him.

That sent a rush of anger through him, and his hands tightened around his weapon. “You just left Tony behind to come through and do what? Annoy the Daleks to death? Well, you’ll do a bang-up job of that.”

Jackie’s face went pale. “Daleks?”

“Yes. That’s who’s been messing around with reality, making the stars go out. This is dangerous, Jacks.” Pete pulled out his hopper and swore when he saw the red flashing light. “As soon as these recharge, you’re going home.”

Her spine stiffened. “Oi, you listen to me, Peter Alan Tyler. I’ve been married to you twice and I’ve never let you tell me what to do. I know this is dangerous. Why do you think I’m here?”

Pete ground his teeth together. “And what if we both die? Tony will be an orphan. Have you thought of that?”
Jackie planted her hands on her hips. “If we both die, then I reckon it means we failed. And if that happens, Tony is gonna die too, isn’t he?” She glared at him. “I might not have caught everything in that lecture the other night, but I know the stars going out means everything is going to end.”

Pete opened his mouth to argue, but the sound of tires squealing interrupted him. He turned and gestured for Jackie to follow him as he jogged silently towards the noise.

“All human transport is forbidden.”

Pete shuddered at the distinctive voice of a Dalek. A moment later, he heard a woman, clearly frightened.

“I surrender. I’m sorry!”

“Daleks do not accept apologies. You will be exterminated.”

Pete growled softly. He wanted to lie low and get to the TARDIS, but he couldn’t let this woman die. Without looking at his wife, he hefted his weapon and crept carefully out of his hiding place.

Sarah Jane stared at the map Mr. Smith was displaying. Harriet Jones had been targeted, and now there were Daleks flying directly for Torchwood. They were being picked off, one by one.

Davros’ voice had been straight out of her nightmares. If he was behind this—the stolen planets, everything—then everyone would die if they couldn’t find the Doctor. Martha, Jack, and Mickey were all trying, and maybe one of them would succeed. But she was a companion of the Doctor, too, and she wouldn’t cower at home and hope someone else did the hard work.

“Mr. Smith!” she said, her voice tremulous. “Where is the TARDIS landing?”

The map shifted to focus on a part of London, instead of Cardiff. “TARDIS heading for vector seven,” the computer said. “Grid reference six six five.” She scanned the map and memorised the location, then spun around and ran to the door.

“But there are Daleks out there,” Luke protested as she grabbed her leather coat from where it hung on the wall.

“I know.” She scooped her keys up from the desk. “I’m sorry, but I have got to find the Doctor.” At the door, she turned around and pointed at her son. “Don’t move. Don’t leave the house. Don’t do anything.”

“I will protect the boy, Sarah Jane,” Mr. Smith promised.

Angry desperation welled up in Sarah Jane. If she left, she couldn’t protect Luke, but finding the Doctor was the best way to save him in the long run. Still, she felt her bottom lip wobble as she looked at him. “I love you. Remember that.”

Luke nodded, and she took off down the stairs before she could convince herself to stay. The TARDIS wasn’t far away; she could get there in her car in less than ten minutes.

The tiny car peeled out as she tore around a corner, and then she caught a glint of light off metal, and a shape that she would never forget. She slammed down on the brakes, not wanting to know what kind of special punishment she’d receive if she actually ran over a pair of Daleks.
The Daleks turned slowly until their eyestalks were pointed at her. “All human transport is forbidden.”

Sarah Jane held up her hands. “I surrender. I’m sorry!”

“Daleks do not accept apologies. You will be exterminated.”

“Exterminate. Exterminate.”

Sarah Jane hid her face behind her arms, knowing full well it would do nothing to shield her from the Dalek’s death rays. She thought of Luke, sitting back in their house with Mr. Smith. I’m sorry.

“Exterminate! Exterminate!”

She heard two separate shots from a laser weapon, one right after the other, and flinched instinctively. But instead of feeling searing pain, she heard two explosions. Maybe... She blinked and carefully lowered her arms, and when she saw two smoking Dalek casings, she looked around for her rescuers as she climbed out of the car.

A slight man with thinning strawberry blonde hair holding an enormous gun stood on the right side of her car. Sarah Jane had never seen him before, but she did think she recognised the blonde woman standing a few feet behind him.

She blinked, trying to place the face. “You’re... I know you.”

The woman nodded once, and the fire in her eyes was familiar enough for Sarah Jane to make the connection. But before she could say anything, Jackie introduced herself.

“Jackie Tyler, Rose’s mum. This is my husband Pete.” She stepped forward and put her hands on her hips. “Now where the hell is my daughter?”
Chapter Notes

There is gorgeous fanart for this chapter, done by @jemsauce on Tumblr.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Thirty-seven: Into the Crucible

The Doctor’s mind spun just as fast as the TARDIS as she moved through the Vortex. Davros. Daleks. Twenty-seven stolen planets, arranged in an optimal configuration… but for what? He tried to catch a glimpse of the timelines, but the gold lines he could usually see dissolved into trails of gold dust that scattered in the wind.

The TARDIS landed with a final, grating thud. Beside him, Jenny wobbled back on her heels, and his arm shot out automatically to catch her.

“Thanks, Dad,” she said as she righted herself. Then she looked from him to the door and back again. “Where are we?”

“London,” the Doctor said. He sniffed and stuck his hands in his pockets. “Occupied London—there are Daleks in the streets.”

Donna had taken a step towards the door, but she stopped at that. “Then… what are we going to do?”

The question hung in the air. The Earth had no defences against a full-scale Dalek invasion. They wouldn’t in one hundred fifty years, and they definitely didn’t now. The Doctor tucked that memory away before he could get lost in the melancholy of missing Susan.

“Come on,” he said briskly, gesturing at the door. “The only way out is through, according to some wise person… Robert Frost, or maybe Alanis Morissette.”

Rose took his hand and walked beside him down the ramp. She nodded encouragingly when he looked at her before opening the door.

It was dark as night outside, even though the TARDIS coordinates had clearly been set for late afternoon. The Doctor glanced up at the sky; the twenty-seven planets were a disaster in the making, but the beauty of it still struck him.

“I’ve never seen London so empty,” Rose whispered. They had landed in the middle of a street, right in front of a church. The street that would normally be busy was littered with abandoned cars, doors left open by owners trying to escape the Daleks.

The door clicked shut behind them, and then Donna said, “Like a ghost town.”

“Sarah Jane said they were taking the people,” the Doctor mused. “What for?” He looked over at Rose. “Did Mickey tell you anything in your dream, Rose?”

She shook her head. “Nothing. Just… that the stars were going out, and I needed to tell you.”
The Doctor huffed. “What does that even mean? The stars are going out?”

“Well, we were kind of hoping you could tell us,” called out a familiar voice.

Rose and the Doctor whirled around, their mouths gaping open when they saw Mickey leaning against the corner of the church, casual as you please.

“Mickey!” Rose dropped the Doctor’s hand and ran to her friend, letting him sweep her up in a hug.

A laser blast sent them all diving for cover, but when there was no accompanying cry of “Exterminate!” they cautiously looked towards the other end of the street. The silhouette of Jack Harkness was instantly recognisable, standing behind the smoking hulk of a Dalek.

“You know,” Jack remarked casually as he lowered his enormous weapon, “you should really be more careful. There are Daleks around, after all.”

The Doctor looked up and down the street. “Yeah…” he muttered. “Actually, why don’t we take this inside? Bit safer in there.”

Once they were inside with the doors shut, he gave himself a moment to take in how full the console room was. It had been a long time since he’d had this many people inside the TARDIS, and to his surprise, he liked the way it felt.

“So, Boss,” Mickey said. “I think a few introductions might be in order.”

“Right, yes.” The Doctor pressed his tongue to the back of his teeth and nodded once.

Before he could say anything more, Jack turned to Donna and Jenny. “Captain Jack Harkness,” he said, winking at them both. “Pleasure to finally meet you in person, Ginger.”

“Jack…” The Doctor pinched the bridge of his nose. The whole exchange was just so predictable and boring.

“Oh, Rose has told me about you,” Donna drawled, sidling closer.

“Of course she has,” the Doctor muttered, earning a laugh and a nudge in the ribs from Rose.

Jenny tilted her head and studied him for a moment, then she turned to the Doctor. “I don’t understand. In all the stories, Jack is your friend. So why don’t you sound like you want us to get to know him, Dad?”

“Dad?” Mickey and Jack exclaimed in unison.

Rose laughed harder, then moved over to Jenny, putting her hands on her shoulders. “Mickey, Jack—I’d like you to meet our daughter, Jenny Tyler.”

Mickey’s jaw was almost on the floor. “Blimey, I know this thing is a time machine, but how long has it been for the two of you?”

Rose rolled her eyes. “No, you plum. She was… Well, it’s a long story, but the short version is that she’s only about six months old. She was born a full adult.”

“You know,” Donna said, “the fact that that is not the strangest thing that’s happened in the last year is really saying something.” She looked at Mickey. “And who are you, then? My name’s Donna—Donna Noble.”
Mickey cracked a grin. “Mickey Smith. Rose and me grew up together on the Estate, and I’ve been living for the last five years in a parallel universe. Looking to move back home, though.”

Even though Rose had known Mickey would be coming back, she hadn’t let herself hope it would be permanent. The life she could see in the future was almost too good to be true.

“Are you really?” she asked.

Mickey nodded. “Yeah. So’s your family, if we can get through this day without the universe ending.” He glanced at Jenny. “Promise me you’ll let me watch when you tell Jackie she’s a gran.”

Rose’s smile faltered. She honestly hadn’t considered that aspect of seeing her mother again, and suddenly, some of her excitement faded.

“Maybe we could just—”

Before she could suggest they not tell Jackie the full truth, an electrical pulse hummed around the TARDIS and the power went out, plunging them into darkness.

“Hang on,” Sarah Jane said, stepping back from Jackie Tyler. She’d seen enough in the last year to not just trust something with a familiar face—especially when it wasn’t where it belonged. “Rose said you’d been taken to a parallel universe.”

Jackie held up a yellow disk. “We came back with these things, to help Rose and the Doctor.”

The muscle in Pete’s jaw tightened, and Sarah Jane had a feeling it hadn’t been his idea for Jackie to join him. She bit back a smile; it seemed Rose had a lot in common with her mother.

“The walls between the worlds are supposed to be closed,” he explained quickly. “But whatever is happening here has caused them to break down—and it’s been rippling forward in time. We’ve been able to jump back and forth for almost a year now.”

Sarah Jane looked at Jackie and Pete Tyler. That made as much sense as anything ever did when the Doctor was involved.

“Right. Thank you for the rescue, but we don’t have time to stand here talking,” she said briskly. “According to Mr. Smith, the TARDIS should be just around the corner. Come on.”

Pete and Jackie slid their teleporters into their pockets, then Pete slung his weapons over his shoulder. The three of them jogged quietly down the street, carefully hiding behind trees and vehicles to stay out of sight of any patrolling Daleks.

When they reached the corner, they concealed themselves behind a van and slowly crept forward. Sarah Jane’s stomach clenched when she saw four Daleks watching as the TARDIS, wrapped in a column of blue light, was pulled off the ground.

“Transferring TARDIS to the Crucible,” intoned one of the Daleks.

“Those teleport things,” Sarah Jane hissed. “Can we use them? If they’ve taken the Doctor to the Dalek spaceship, then that’s where we need to be.”

“Thing is,” Pete said, “they aren’t just teleporters. They’re dimension hoppers, and they rip a hole in the fabric of space every time we use them.”
Sarah Jane rolled her eyes. The last bit of her doubts regarding the couple were gone; she’d been around long enough to recognise when someone was parroting what the Doctor had told them.

“But can we use them?” she pressed. If the Daleks won and the universe ended, would it matter if the fabric of space got a little buggered up in the process?


Sarah Jane nodded once. There was only one thing left to do then. “Then put down your guns.”

“Excuse me?” Pete asked indignantly.

“If you’re carrying a gun, they’ll shoot you dead.” She stepped out of the safety of their hiding spot and held up her hands. “Daleks, I surrender.”

Four eyestalks swivelled to look at her. “All humans in this sector will be taken to the Crucible,” a Dalek announced.

Sarah Jane tensed as she waited to see what the Tylers would do. She could hear lowered voices arguing behind her, then Jackie spoke up.

“And us. We surrender.”

Sarah Jane watched Jackie step out of the shadows, her hands held up. She held her breath, waiting for Pete Tyler. He couldn’t stay hidden—Jackie had given him away by using a plural.

A moment later, Pete groaned and said, “Yeah, all right. We surrender.”

“You will all be taken to the Crucible!”

The Daleks herded them into a group with other humans, all wide-eyed and shaking in terror. They stood in a huddle in the middle of the street with their arms over their heads, waiting for what came next.

Then the same blue light that had surrounded the TARDIS swirled around them, and within seconds, the London street was replaced by familiar-looking architecture. Sarah Jane looked around at the Crucible and shook her head; apparently, the Daleks hadn’t updated their interior decorating in the years since she’d last encountered them.

oOoOoOoOo

As soon as she got off the phone with Jack, Martha picked up the Project Indigo backpack and shrugged the straps over her shoulders, adjusting and tightening them until they sat right. “Now Jack’s explained the base code, I know how this teleport works,” she told her mum, who stood right behind her. She frowned. “I think.”

She looked at her mum, biting her lip nervously, and tried for a reassuring smile. “But you just stay indoors. There’s no Daleks on this street. You should be all right. Just er, keep quiet,” she mumbled as she walked away from her mother, trying to find a bit of open space.

“But where are you going?” her mum asked.

Martha heard the panic in her voice and hated herself for sending her mother right back to her worst nightmare. Francine had never fully accepted her work, always hoping she would find something safe at a civilian hospital instead. Working for UNIT reminded her too much of the year
on the Valiant, and she was constantly worried Martha would be killed.

But Martha loved her job. She loved making a difference, and she wouldn’t stop now, not even to make her mother more comfortable. She clenched her fists at her side and set her jaw.

“I’m a member of UNIT, and they gave me the Osterhagen Key. I’ve got to do my job.” Her mum lunged for her, and Martha held up a hand to stop her. “I’m sorry.”

“Martha,” her mum pleaded. “What’s an Osterhagen Key? Tell me. What does it do?”

Martha shuddered at the knowledge. She wouldn’t burden her mum or anyone else with that. “Love you,” she said. Then she pulled the ripcords and gasped as she felt the air squeeze around her.

Space widened out an interminable amount of time later, and a pinprick of light solidified into a forest. Martha landed hard on her bum, then scrambled to her hands and knees when she heard a harsh, robotic voice only a few dozen yards away.

“Exterminieren! Exterminieren!”

Martha blinked. *I made it to Germany, then.*

“Halt! Sonst werden wir Sie exterminieren! Sie sind jetzt ein Gefangener der Daleks!”

She jumped up and jogged through the trees until she could look down a small hill and see a formation of four Daleks—standard patrol formation, she remembered from reading UNIT files—floating through the forest.

“Exterminieren. Exterminieren.”

Martha let out a breath when she confirmed they were going the opposite direction of her destination, then she took off running.

In the eerie glow of the emergency lights, the Doctor and Rose turned to the console. “What’s going on?” Rose whispered as they pulled the monitor around.

But it was blank, which they should have expected given the power loss. While they were still staring at it, the TARDIS shifted beneath their feet.

Rose grabbed the console and looked around the room. “They’ve got us.”

The Doctor nodded, turning to instrument readouts that didn’t depend on primary power. “They’ve caught us up in some kind of chronon loop, which explains why the power is gone, too.”

“But where are they taking us?” Jenny asked.

“There’s a massive Dalek ship at the centre of the planets,” Jack explained. “They’re calling it the Crucible. Guess that’s our destination.”

Donna looked at the Doctor. “You said these planets were like an engine. But what for?”

The Doctor leaned on the console and narrowed his eyes at Mickey. “Mickey, you’ve been in a parallel world. That world’s running ahead of this universe. You’ve seen the future,” he emphasised. “What was it?”
Mickey crossed his arms over his chest. “It’s the darkness.”

“You told me the stars were going out,” Rose agreed.

Mickey frowned at her, and the Doctor shook his head quickly. “Alternate timelines, things that only happened in dreams… it’s a long story, Mickey. But is that true?”

“Well, yeah.” Mickey looked like he wanted to ask more questions, but after a moment, he shrugged and looked at the Doctor. “We looked up at the sky and they were just dying. Going out, one by one. And we met a few trans-dimensional species who told us it wasn’t just our world—it was all of reality.”

The Doctor shoved his hand through his hair. “All of reality,” he muttered. “Blimey.”

“Yeah, exactly,” Mickey agreed. “That’s when we got a team of scientists together to take the old dimension hoppers and turn them into a dimension cannon that could send me back here, to get you and see if you could help. We knew we needed you, but we wanted to make the trip with as little damage to the multiverse as possible.” His lips thinned and the glint in his eyes hardened. “But when I started jumping, I realised it didn’t matter anymore. It was all dying—even the Void.”

The Doctor rubbed his hand over his mouth. If the Void was dying, that explained how travel between the parallel worlds was possible.

Mickey looked over at Rose. “And then it started happening,” he said.


“The same two words, in every world I landed on.”

Rose tensed.

“Bad Wolf,” she said in unison with Mickey.

Mickey nodded. “Yeah. I figured… I figured it was a message from you to keep going. Like you said before, a message to lead me here. Bad Wolf here, Bad Wolf there.” He hesitated. “But if you had a dream about something that didn’t even happen…”

The console beeped, and the Doctor bent over to look at the monitor, trying to ignore the hollow feeling in his stomach at the mention of Bad Wolf. A red dot flashed at the centre of the planetary configuration. “The Dalek Crucible,” he said. “All aboard.”

There was a clang when they landed, as if they were on a metal surface. Everyone on board looked towards the door, and they could all hear the Daleks outside.

“The TARDIS is secured.”

“Doctor, you will step forth or die.”

The Doctor stuck his hands into his pockets, and the tension in his back pulled his suit jacket tight across his shoulders. “We’ll have to go out. Because if we don’t, they’ll get in.”

Rose’s jaw dropped—the TARDIS was supposed to be impregnable! But before she could remind him that he’d once promised the hordes of Genghis Khan couldn’t get through those doors, she understood what he didn’t want to say out loud. These Daleks were strong enough to get in. Their only chance of survival was to obey… for now.
But no one else had that insight. “I thought nothing could get in unless you let them!” Donna argued, her voice going up a few octaves.

“You’ve got extrapolator shielding,” Jack pointed out helpfully.

The Doctor turned slowly and looked at this group, the closest thing he’d had to a family in… in centuries, really. He hated that he had to explain to them why they were no longer safe in the TARDIS, the way he’d always promised they would be.

He shrugged his shoulders and sighed. “The Daleks we fought on the Game Station were scavengers and hybrids, and mad. But this is a fully-fledged Dalek Empire, at the height of its power. Experts at fighting TARDISes—they can do anything.” He gestured at the door behind him. “Right now, that wooden door is just wood.”

Rose walked over to the console and pressed her hand to it, and the Doctor could feel them talking. It was something that had been happening more often since the Library. Yes, and that’s not concerning in the slightest, he told himself sarcastically. He still remembered how Rose had looked, facing down the Vashta Nerada. And he had his own suspicions on how the TARDIS had come to them, suspicions he refused to voice.

It was tempting to ask Rose if she could see anything in the timelines that he couldn’t. The tiny motes of golden dust he still saw refused to coalesce into anything solid, but he had a feeling Rose had a clearer picture of what was happening than he did. On the other hand, he wasn’t sure he wanted his suspicions confirmed.

He rubbed his hand over his face, trying to find another way out of the situation. Hang on, how did Jack and Mickey find us in the first place?

“Unless…” he said slowly, looking at his friends. “You both teleported to that street. I don’t suppose either of you could teleport out of here?”

His gaze darted from Jack to Jenny. Despite the disaster in the Library, it was still his fatherly instinct to get his daughter to safety if at all possible.

But Jack and Mickey both shook their heads. “Mine needs another twenty minutes to recharge,” Mickey told him.

“Yeah, and mine went down with the power loss,” Jack added.

Of course it had—because a chronon loop by nature would interfere with the workings of a Vortex Manipulator.

Jenny crossed her arms over her chest. “And besides,” she said, sounding just like Rose, “if you think I’m going to let you send me away again…” She tilted her chin defiantly, and the Doctor gave up.

Mickey snorted. “You’re Jackie Tyler’s granddaughter, all right.”

Jenny offered him an uncertain smile, then stepped forward and put her hand on the Doctor’s arm. “So, it’s like you said, right Dad? The only way out is through?”

The Doctor swallowed hard. “Yep, exactly.” He bobbed his head, trying to look upbeat. “All of us together.” Everyone nodded, except for Rose, who was still talking to the TARDIS. “Rose?”

She didn’t move, and his concern deepened. He stepped around their friends and carefully put a hand
on her shoulder, calming her telepathically when she jumped. “We can’t stay here, love.”

Rose felt the warm pulse of the TARDIS beneath her palm. She knew they didn’t have anywhere to hide, but somehow… she could hardly bear to pull her hand away from the ship. The ship’s song beckoned to her and pulled her in. This was where she needed to be.

But when the Doctor reached for her hand, Rose sighed and lifted it herself, sticking both her hands in her pockets. A frown appeared between his eyebrows, but she knew… holding hands right now would only make everything worse. It was next to impossible to hold any thoughts back from him when they were touching.

Now, if only she knew exactly what she was keeping from him.

The Doctor sighed and rested his hands on her shoulders, brushing his thumbs over the blue leather of her coat. “I don’t want to leave her either,” he whispered. “But there’s nothing else we can do.”

His resignation hurt, and Rose winked and shot him a cheeky smile, hoping to cheer him up. “Guess it’s time for the Stuff of Legend to go to work.”

It worked. The Doctor chuckled at her reference, and when he turned and led the way to the door, there was a slight bounce in his step that had been missing since they’d talked to Davros.

Rose allowed her smile to fade as he walked away. The words of the albino servant echoed in Rose’s mind. It must be you.

The grating voices of the Daleks filled the TARDIS again, shaking her out of her reverie.

“Surrender, Doctor, and face your Dalek masters.”

“Crucible on maximum alert.”

The Doctor turned around at the base of the ramp. Rose leaned against a strut as he looked at all of them, letting his gaze settle on each one of them individually for a few moments. She watched, with a faint sense of detachment, while they all tried to gear themselves up to go out to face the Daleks.

He drew a deep breath and looked at the group of people that had become their family. “Before we go out there, I just wanted to say… You’ve been brilliant, all of you.” His gaze landed on Jenny. “I’m sorry we couldn’t see more planets together, Jenny. And Donna.” He sighed. “I hope you know how brilliant you are.” He nodded at Jack and Mickey. “I’ve teased and heckled you both, but you need to know that there is no one else I’d rather have at my side as we face an army of Daleks.”

He looked up at Rose, and the wistful smile on his face made her throat tight. “Rose Tyler.” You, love… Whatever happens today, whether our forever ends, or if we somehow manage to save the day, don’t forget that I will never regret a single thing about our life together.

Rose nodded. I love you, Doctor. For as long as our forever lasts.

His Adam’s apple bobbed. “Blimey,” he muttered, then he turned around sharply and pulled the door open.

Rose watched as he exited the TARDIS, Jenny right behind him. Normally, it would feel wrong to let him go off to face the Daleks without her at his side, but today, the song of the TARDIS soothed her concerns. She felt her lips curl in a small smile as she leaned on the railing at the base of the ramp.
Outside the ship, the Daleks started chanting again, sensing victory at hand. “Daleks reign supreme. All hail the Daleks!”

The grating cheer woke Rose up from the daze the song had lulled her in to, and she pushed off from the railing, intent on following them. Ahead of her, Donna and Jack followed the Doctor and Jenny out of the Crucible, and Rose put her left foot on the ramp.

But each step felt like she was walking through treacle, and she stopped only halfway up the ramp. Mickey was at the door now, and he shot Rose a glance over his shoulder before stepping out of the ship. You coming, babe? it said.

When Rose hesitated, the TARDIS song crescendoed in her ears, nearly drowning out the sound of the Daleks claiming they reigned supreme. It was like… like a siren’s song, and even though she knew the myth of the sirens, the call of the music still pulled at her.

Rose shook her head and kept walking. Who knew what the Daleks would do to her if she stayed in the TARDIS? Better to do as they said, for now. And then the Doctor and I can figure out how to stop them, together, she promised herself. The stuff of legend, remember?

The wilder rendition of the TARDIS song that she’d heard at the Shadow Proclamation poured over Rose as she approached the door. A foot away, she finally remembered where she’d heard it before, or more precisely, when.

She stopped and looked back at the console. Maybe today wouldn’t be another saga of the Stuff of Legend. Maybe today another legend would gain a new chapter.

oOoOoOoOo

“Daleks reign supreme. All hail the Daleks!”

In the Crucible, the Doctor stared at the thousands of Daleks swarming above them. He recognised the size and shape of the Dalek holding court—it was the Supreme Dalek. There was no way they were going to get out of this. He had any number of tricks up his sleeve, but as his oldest nemesis, the Daleks knew them all.

“Behold, Doctor,” the Supreme Dalek said. “Behold the might of the true Dalek race.”

And there it was. A shiver in the timelines, the tiniest glimpse of a moment when maybe, not everything was hopeless. The Doctor looked around for Rose, to see if she’d felt it too, and he realised she still hadn’t left the TARDIS.

His empty hand twitched at his side, looking for hers. You need to join us, Rose, he told her. I know you hate to leave her, but you’ll be no safer in there.

In answer, the TARDIS doors slammed shut. If the Doctor hadn’t known their ship would never put Rose in danger, he would have thought she’d closed the doors herself. He pivoted and ran for the ship, determined to force his way back inside. But the doors wouldn’t budge.

A moment later, serene calm brushed against his mind. Don’t, love, she told him. This is where I need to be. She always takes us where we need to go, after all.

“Oh, no you don’t,” he growled at his ship, grabbing the handles and rattling the doors. “You are not going to use a ridiculous line like that to convince Rose to stay in there!”

His TARDIS and his bond mate were both absolutely content with the course of events, but the
Doctor refused to accept it. He looked over his shoulder at the Supreme Dalek. If the TARDIS wasn’t behind this, it must have been the Daleks.

“What did you do?!” he yelled.

“This is not of Dalek origin,” the Supreme Dalek denied indignantly.

The Doctor reached for his sonic screwdriver, then ground his teeth together when he remembered he’d left it in his coat, which was still in the TARDIS.

He wheeled around and glared at the Supreme Dalek. “Stop it! She’s my wife,” he said, knowing he wasn’t telling them anything they didn’t know. Thanks to the path web, every Dalek they met would recognise Rose as his wife. “Now open the door and let her out.”

“This is Time Lord treachery,” the Supreme Dalek intoned.

The Doctor snorted. “Me? Do you think I’d leave Rose behind?” He gestured wildly at the TARDIS. “The door just closed on its own!”

The Supreme Dalek’s eyestalk seemed to flash smugly. “We have the Doctor’s mate trapped in the Doctor’s TARDIS.”

“What are you going to do?” the Doctor demanded, his stomach clenching in knots.

“The TARDIS is a weapon and it will be destroyed.”

A metallic clang echoed in the room, and the Doctor spun and watched in horror as a trapdoor opened beneath the TARDIS. He took a half step towards the ship, but it slid through the opening before he could reach it.

*Rose!*

    oOoOoOoOo

“Behold, Doctor. Behold the might of the true Dalek race.”

The menace in his voice was almost enough to pull Rose outside to stand with the Doctor. And yet… what could she accomplish on the Crucible, surrounded by what sounded like thousands of Daleks?

Thousands of Daleks.

Rose turned away from the door and looked around the console room. She’d stood in this room before, when the Doctor had faced the Daleks and thought he was going to die. Although he hadn’t *fully* given up today, it was obvious he didn’t have much hope in any of the ideas that were floating around in his head.

The song in her head beckoned her forward, and she took a step towards the console. *Maybe…*

She hesitated for a moment when the Doctor called for her over the bond. *You need to join us, Rose,* he told her. *I know you hate to leave her, but you’ll be no safer in there.*

Even as she considered turning around and leaving the TARDIS, the door swung shut. Anger and panic slammed into her over the bond, and she could hear the Doctor’s footsteps outside the ship as he ran to the doors and started pounding on them.
But the TARDIS song was louder now, and Rose knew this was where she needed to be. She jogged up the ramp and pressed her hand to the door. The blue wood was all that kept their palms from touching.

*Don’t, love,* she told the Doctor, projecting the calm that had washed over her the moment the doors shut. *This is where I need to be. She always takes us where we need to go, after all.*

She heard the handle rattle a moment later, and knew he had not accepted her explanation. “You are not going to use a ridiculous line like that to convince Rose to stay in there!” he shouted at the TARDIS as he pulled on the door.

Rose took a breath, then walked away from the door, ignoring the urge to continue soothing him. She couldn’t stand by the door all day and assure him she was fine.

The Doctor panicked when he sensed her walking away from him. “What did you do?!” he yelled.

The Supreme Dalek refused to take responsibility. “This is not of Dalek origin.” Rose agreed—the TARDIS had kept her here, so they could save everyone.

Something was coming. There was a charge in the air making the hairs on her arm stand up, and Rose settled onto the jump seat to wait for the signal that it was time to begin.

Outside, the Doctor was still arguing with the Supreme Dalek. Rose wanted to tell him it was pointless—even if she weren’t exactly where Time wanted her, the Daleks would never give in to his sentimental plea to let her go.

A moment later, she felt her stomach lodge itself in her throat when the TARDIS suddenly dropped. *Rose!* The Doctor cried out, his panic cutting through the vibrating timelines. She could see what had happened in his mind’s eye—a trap door had opened under the ship, sending it plummeting into the heart of the Crucible.

“Allons-y,” she said under her breath. Then she grabbed onto the edge of the seat and held tight.

The Doctor ran to the edge of the trap door and stared down the empty shaft, straining for a glimpse of the TARDIS. His hearts thumped wildly in his chest as he imagined all kinds of danger that could be waiting for Rose at the end of her fall.

“Rose! Can you get to the controls and fly her out of there? I know the Daleks would figure out that you’d escaped, and they’d probably pull you right back to the Crucible, but at least you’d still be alive. He rubbed his hands over his face when she didn’t answer. *Please, at least tell me you’re all right.*

In response to his panic, he felt a phantom pressure on his hand, and he returned Rose’s embrace desperately. *We’re fine, Doctor. Stay calm. I promise, this is not how our forever ends.*

The Doctor took a deep breath. He still couldn’t see the timelines, but he could feel them moving close to a temporal tipping moment. Maybe Rose was right. Maybe this was supposed to happen. They’d certainly gotten enough warnings in the last few months that Bad Wolf would be coming back…

That left one thought, crystal clear. If this was all part of a plan, he couldn’t let on—not to anyone. The Daleks had to believe he thought Rose was dead.
He turned back around and ran towards the Supreme Dalek. It wasn’t hard to call upon the anger he knew the Daleks would expect of him. Even if Rose and the TARDIS were right and this had to happen, the Daleks had still tried to kill her.

“What are you doing? Bring her back!” he shouted. The adrenaline left by the close call put an edge in his voice. “What have you done? Where will that take her?” he demanded, gesturing at the empty spot the TARDIS had stood.

“The Crucible has a heart of Z-neutrino energy,” the Supreme Dalek pronounced smugly. “The TARDIS will be deposited into the core.”

The Doctor’s hearts stopped and he stumbled back a few steps. “But you can’t.” He shook his head rapidly. “You’ve taken the defences down. It’ll be torn apart!” Without shields, the TARDIS would disintegrate in those kind of surroundings. It wouldn’t matter that Rose was there to fly her.

Just imagining the excruciating pain gave the Doctor vertigo. His stomach attempted to rebel against the sensation, and even though he managed to not throw up, he still swayed on his feet. The eddy of timelines spinning around them didn’t make it any easier to keep his breakfast down, and he was grateful when Jenny reached for his hand.

“Dad, Mum is still in there,” she whispered. “What will happen if…”

He shook his head, unable to answer, and Jenny stifled a cry.

“Let her go!” Jack growled.

“The female and the TARDIS will perish together. Observe.”

The Supreme Dalek waved his death ray at something behind the Doctor, and as he turned around, letting go of Jenny’s hand in the process, a view screen opened up. The TARDIS was floating in a pool of yellow energy, and even in this pixelated depiction, he could tell the windows had shattered, or would soon. The entire console room would be flooded with Z-neutrino energy. Rose would die.

“The last child of Gallifrey is powerless—as is your mate.”

Rose was fine, but for how much longer? The Doctor turned on the Daleks, his voice tight with fear. “You can’t do this. She’s… I…” He swallowed hard, his chest heaving as he considered the kind of death that awaited Rose if something didn’t happen. “Put me in her place,” he suggested, ignoring the sharp smack of Rose’s anger when she heard that idea. “You can do anything to me. I don’t care—just get my wife out of there!”

The TARDIS’ downward spiral into wherever they were going was the worst flight Rose had been on since they’d accidentally fallen into a parallel universe. Her pilot’s instincts were screaming at her to get up, to stop her ship from crashing, but the TARDIS hummed a warning when she tried to stand up.

With a sort of detached realisation, Rose saw herself, hands wrapped around the edge of the jump seat, wearing her new blue coat with her hair around her shoulders. The picture unlocked the memory of her earlier visions, and she knew. The moment was almost here. She was right where she needed to be.

She dug her fingers more deeply into the worn suede upholstery.
The Doctor was begging her fly the TARDIS, to forget about subterfuge and get herself to safety. Rose shook her head and settled in for the ride, then she ran a soothing touch over the bond.

_We’re fine, Doctor. Stay calm._ Timelines glittered around her, and she loved the variety of lives they could have from this point on. _I promise, this is not how our forever ends._

He wavered for a moment, but then his emotions stabilised. His resolve solidified, and she caught a hint of his plan—to feign fear and anger so hopefully, the Daleks wouldn’t catch wind of what she was doing until it was too late.

Rose barely had time to thank him for trusting her when she felt a spike of genuine fear—no, of terror. Seconds later, the rapid descent of the TARDIS stopped, and she suspected that knowledge of their destination had driven the Doctor’s fear this time.

The roundels in the walls burst inward, filling the console room with painfully bright light. Despite her utter confidence in Time, Rose felt a natural surge of fear as their ship started to fall down around her head.

In the midst of the console room on fire, a different kind of golden light rose from one of the console panels. Staring at the light, Rose could almost hear the TARDIS, calling her forward.

She’d seen this in her visions, too. The console room filled with fire, and her own hand reaching for the console. It was all happening exactly as she’d seen. Rose stood slowly and took a step towards the TARDIS, obeying the call she trusted more than anyone but the Doctor.

The TARDIS shifted under her feet and she nearly fell to her knees again. Fear shot through her, the fear that she might be wrong, or that even if she were right and this was what she needed to do, it wouldn’t work.

She took another step and reached for the bond at the same time, wanting a moment with the Doctor just in case this actually was the end for them. But when the connection was made, instead of feeling the Doctor’s warm embrace, she heard him begging the Daleks to be put in the TARDIS in her place.

Her anger was swift and sharp. Being in the TARDIS during whatever was about to happen had been her choice. What was more, it _had_ to be her. He couldn’t handle whatever was coming.

The TARDIS was still pulling her forward, and she decided to ignore his overprotectiveness for now. They could argue about it later, after they were safe and back home.

All thoughts of arguing were driven from her mind when she saw what the TARDIS had been trying to show her. A few feet to her right, a panel on the console glowed with golden light. Rose stared at it. She knew that light, and she knew this part of the ship. Directly below this panel rested the heart of the TARDIS and all the power of the Time Vortex.

The TARDIS rocked violently, and this time, Rose couldn’t maintain her balance. She hit the floor, hard. The grating bit into her palms, and she ducked her head when more roundels shattered, sending glass flying through the air.

Light caught her eyes again. Rose looked up slowly. Wisps of golden light seeped out from the heart of the TARDIS. Her fingers itched, and she yearned to open it up again and stare into Time.

But she’d promised the Doctor after the _Valiant_ that she wouldn’t do that again. It had killed her the first time, and despite her personal confidence that she would regenerate, if there was another route she could take, she didn’t want to put her life at risk.
The song urged her to look up, to stand again. Rose carefully got to her feet, using the console to steady herself. The glowing panel was right there, and she knew what she needed to do. She couldn’t look into the heart, but she could touch the TARDIS’ soul.

She slowly moved her hands towards the panel. The Bad Wolf theme she’d been hearing all day surrounded her, and for a moment, the world narrowed to nothing but herself and the TARDIS.

She touched the panel, and a second later, her head tipped back as she felt another consciousness merge with her own. Typically, that sensation would be terrifying, but this time, she knew the other mind almost as well as she knew her own and the Doctor’s.

Rose smiled and welcomed the TARDIS into her mind.

\[ \text{oOoOoOoOo} \]

The Doctor stared at the Supreme Dalek, his chest heaving with the desperate need to do something to save Rose. Before he could lunge across the room at the Dalek and get himself killed, something tickled at his telepathic centre. He brushed it off, but then it grew stronger.

The Doctor had to press his lips together to hold back a gasp when he realised what he was feeling. The bonds connecting him to the TARDIS and to Rose had just twisted themselves into one cord—still two filaments, but for now, at least, they were completely entwined.

The Bad Wolf had created herself once more.

Chapter End Notes

I have been busy and tired for the last several weeks, and that’s cut into my ability to keep ahead in editing and writing the rest of this story. To take pressure off myself, I'm switching to posting every other week until I have the rest of the story ready. The next chapter will be up on February 13, instead of the sixth. Thank you.
Bad Wolf Reborn

The TARDIS wrapped herself around Rose, using the huon particles that had been left behind to form a full link between them. Knowledge surged through Rose, all the knowledge and memories of a being with millennia of experience—including the knowledge of what exactly had just happened.

_Oh, that’s why we left those huon particles. They were kind of like a backdoor, so we could become Bad Wolf again._

_That’s right, my Wolf._

Rose blinked when she heard the TARDIS in her mind, speaking in full sentences. Even though she never had a problem understanding the ship, their conversations were usually more of a flow of understanding as they each shared ideas rather than actual dialogue.

A tinkle of laughter felt like gold light in the back of her mind._Yes, when we are one, we can speak in full sentences._

And they were one. It was odd, Rose thought with some detachment. She could feel the TARDIS in her mind, and Bad Wolf, and herself… and yet somehow, all three were also one.

_But about the huon particles…_ Rose said, leading them back to the original topic of conversation. _Is this going go leave me feeling all tired and worn out for a week?_

_No. It was only the addition of the Time Vortex that left you dependent on me. This time when we separate, the huon particles in you will stabilise, and if we’re ever apart, you won’t get sick again._

Rose held her hand up and observed the tinge of gold running underneath her skin._Why didn’t you tell me that before?_

_Too much foreknowledge is not good for a temporal being. You saw your entire life when you held the power of the Vortex. You saw it all, and then you locked the memories away, to be unlocked only when they became relevant._

Rose sighed, but that was fair enough. And truthfully, she’d rather have some surprises left in her life, instead of having it an open book laid out in front of her.

She knew the exact moment the Doctor realised what had happened, and braced herself for his fear or disapproval. Instead, she was met mostly with confusion. She’d done what she’d hinted at over a year ago and become Bad Wolf without looking into the Time Vortex, and he couldn’t understand how.

_We are the Bad Wolf,_ she said simply, the plural coming naturally._We cannot be uncreated._

It took him a moment to process that, then his confusion was replaced with something more like pride and hope. Everything they’d been told about Bad Wolf in the last year helped him understand that they had always been coming to this point, and that Bad Wolf was the only way to save the universe.

Rose ducked below the console a moment before she heard shattering glass and realised the rest of the roundels and the glass in the door had just exploded from the pressure of floating on a sea of Z-neutrino energy. The hint of prescience that came with being Bad Wolf was an odd sensation, but since it had just saved her life, she wasn’t going to complain.
While she waited for the turbulence to smooth out, Rose deepened the bond with the Doctor so she could eavesdrop on the conversation on the Crucible. When the Supreme Dalek gloated over their imminent deaths—the death of Rose, and the death of the TARDIS—the Bad Wolf couldn’t help but smirk.

Time tugged at her, and she got to her feet and pressed a series of buttons that Rose Tyler didn’t quite understand yet. But as the TARDIS—as the Bad Wolf—she knew they would time the flight of the TARDIS to the moment the Daleks’ countdown ended. The ship would disappear from their monitor exactly when they expected, but instead of dissolving into atoms, it would rematerialise outside the Crucible, undetected.

Rose pressed the final button when the countdown reached four, and she felt the moment the TARDIS left the heart of the Crucible. The Doctor could feel it too, and they allowed themselves just a moment to celebrate together, before they each focused on the separate tasks they needed to do before they could be reunited.

Despite all the hints of Bad Wolf that they’d gotten in the last year, the Doctor had remained firmly in denial. Bad Wolf had killed Rose once, and her suggestion that it might be possible without risking that danger seemed… remote, at best.

And yet he could tell she’d kept her promise and not looked into the Time Vortex. With a full bond between them, he would have witnessed the power of raw time along with her. And while the idea of ruling the universe beside her as the god and goddess of time had some appeal, the awareness that their physical bodies couldn’t withstand the power killed his interest.

He shoved his trembling hands into his hair and tugged, vaguely aware that he still needed to present a picture of an angry, grieving husband to the Daleks.

The sharp pain in his scalp focused his thoughts. How had Rose merged with the TARDIS so completely? Taking an eleventh dimensional matrix and folding it into a flesh body shouldn’t be possible, and if it were, it should be putting far more strain on the physical form than it seemed to be.

We are the Bad Wolf, Rose reminded him. We cannot be uncreated.

It was incomprehensible to him, and yet it was obviously true. The Doctor growled and shoved his hands into his pockets as he straightened up to stare at the Daleks. Rose was safe, but they couldn’t know that.

“Your TARDIS and your mate,” the Supreme Dalek crowed, not realising how prophetic his words were. “You are connected to them both—now feel them die.”

The golden light in the Doctor’s mind felt amused as it listened to the words of the Daleks through their connection. The Doctor was able to channel his confusion and shock into something he hoped still looked like fear and anger.

“Total TARDIS destruction in ten rels,” a Dalek announced. “Nine, eight, seven, six, Five, four, three, two, one.”

The TARDIS disappeared from the screen, but she didn’t disappear from his mind, and neither did Rose. The Doctor bit his lip to hold back his cry of victory. Oh, the Daleks had done it now. Because the last time a fleet of Daleks had gone up against Bad Wolf, they had been dissolved to dust.
If it were possible for a Dalek to smirk, the Supreme Dalek was doing it now. He waved his death ray and plunger arm in excitement. “The TARDIS has been destroyed. Now tell me, Doctor. What do you feel? Anger? Sorrow? Despair?”

Hope. The Doctor felt hope. Because Rose had flown the TARDIS out of the Crucible and was hiding somewhere, while she and the TARDIS worked on a plan. And if there was one thing that would always give him hope, it was the idea that Rose and the TARDIS together could do almost anything they set their minds to.

The Doctor pressed his lips together, hoping he looked like he was holding back tears instead of laughter. He looked at the blank screen, summoning up the empty tone of voice he’d used the last time Rose had been killed. “Yeah.”

Jenny’s grief buffeted against him. The Doctor frowned hard enough to get a headache between his eyes—couldn’t she feel Rose still alive? His eyes widened after a moment when he realised that Bad Wolf felt different enough from Rose to confuse a young telepath.

He wrapped an arm around her and pulled her close. Pressing a kiss to her temple, he used the brief connection to project calm and hope to her. He couldn’t tell her what had happened, but he couldn’t let her go without some kind of comfort.

“Then if emotions are so important, surely we have enhanced you?” the Supreme Dalek taunted.

“Doctor?”

The Doctor turned slowly to meet Mickey and Jack’s disbelieving looks. “Rose was there… with the TARDIS,” he said, grinding out the words so they sounded painful. He met each man’s gaze directly, holding it for a moment until he thought they understood. They both knew what Rose could do with the TARDIS.

Jack’s gaze flicked over the Doctor’s shoulder to look at the Daleks. He set his jaw, then pulled his service revolver out and ran past the Doctor.

“You want emotions?” Jack challenged. “Then feel this!” He fired the weapon at the Supreme Dalek. The bullets made no dent in the polycarbide casing, but that hadn’t been Jack’s goal.

“Exterminate!”

The Doctor carefully shielded Jenny with his body as the Supreme Dalek fired on Jack. Should the red menace get the idea to let his death ray go astray, he didn’t want it coming anywhere near his daughter.

A moment later, the Doctor shuddered when he felt the wrongness that accompanied one of Jack’s deaths. Donna didn’t know about Jack’s trick though, and she darted forward to bend over him.

“They… they just killed him,” she said, her voice numb. “First Rose, now Jack.”

The Doctor let go of Jenny and bent down to pull Donna to her feet. “I know. I’m sorry,” he said, apologising more for not being able to tell her the truth than anything else.

“Escort them to the Vault,” the Supreme Dalek ordered.

Donna stood up, still staring down at Jack’s currently-dead body. The Doctor rested a hand on the small of her back as a Dalek rolled forward to escort them into a lift.
“There’s nothing we can do,” he told Donna. But as they walked away, he glanced over his shoulder just in time to catch Jack’s wink.

“They are the playthings of Davros now,” the Supreme Dalek gloated, unaware that the enemies he thought he was eliminating one by one were actually escaping his watchful eyestalk and forging plans for his eventual defeat.

oOoOoOoOo

Martha’s trek through the German forest was cold and fraught with danger. More than once, she was nearly spotted by a Dalek patrol, but each time she managed to duck behind a convenient tree just in time.

Still, by the time she reached a clearing and spotted the large stone castle, illuminated by spotlights, her nerves were shot. A voice called out to her, and Martha looked up at the old woman climbing down from the ramparts.

“Hier ist niemand. Was immer Sie wollen, gehen Sie fort. Lassen Sie mich in Ruhe!”

Martha sighed; she sympathised with the woman for wanting to be left in peace, but she didn’t have that option. “Ich heisse Martha Jones,” she stated clearly, giving her identification to the woman she knew was an operative, despite her appearance. “Ich komme von UNIT. Agentin fuenf sechs sechs sieben eins, von der medizinischen Abteilung.”

The woman stopped and stared at her from the top of the hill the castle had been built on. “Es hiess Sie kaemen vorbei. That accent. That is London, ja?” She tilted her head and her lips twisted into a half-smile. “I went to London. Long time ago.”

Martha ignored the attempt at casual conversation. There was something wrong here. “I thought this place was supposed to be guarded.”

“They were soldiers. Boys.” The woman scoffed, and Martha knew what had happened before she finished the story. “I brought them food every day. But when der Albtraum came from the sky, they went home—to die.” Her voice cracked, and she pressed her lips together and swallowed hard before speaking again. “But not you,” she said after a moment.

“I’ve got a job to do.” Martha didn’t have the luxury of being able to leave and let the nightmare from the sky play out. It was her job to stop it.

She climbed the stairs and the woman let her into the castle. Even though Martha had never been to this particular site, she’d been shown pictures when they’d first told her about the Osterhagen key and how it worked. She knew exactly how to get to the secret station, hidden behind the castle walls.

The old woman watched her as she strode through the unused rooms and found the tapestry hanging on the wall that concealed the keypad. Martha yanked it down and pressed her hand to it.

While she waited for it to give her clearance to enter, the woman continued her story. “London. In those days, to see it. So much glamour. I was so young. I heard the soldiers talking many times. They would speak of the Osterhagen Key. I think London must be changed now, yes? But still, the glamour.”

Martha’s handprint checked out, and she pulled the heavy door open. Then, to her surprise, she heard the distinctive click of a safety being removed on a revolver, and she turned around to stare at the woman who had not actually been caught in nostalgic memories, but had been slowly sussing her out.
“You will not go,” she said, but though the words were spoken fiercely, the weapon wobbled in her hands and Martha knew she was not in any true danger.

“I’ve got no choice.” The words came out pleading, asking the woman to understand that she would never think of using the Osterhagen Key if there were any other way. Her stomach was tied in knots at just the thought of what she was attempting, but the fate of the universe was in the balance.

“I know the Key.” The woman’s eyes were wide with horror. “What it does. Sie sind der Albtraum, nicht die anderen, Sie! Ich sollte Sie umbringen, am besten gleich jetzt!”

The Doctor’s voice whispered in her ear that the woman was right—Martha was the nightmare. The idea of setting off a string of nuclear warheads in the surface of the Earth rather than fighting until they had exhausted every option… it was wrong. It was against everything the Doctor had taught her, and it went directly against her medical training to do no harm.

But she had an order. “Then do it,” she challenged. The woman stared at her for another interminable minute, then finally she dropped her hand.

No longer under threat, Martha nodded once, then turned and stepped into the lift.

“Martha, Zur Hoelle mit Dir!” the woman cried after her.

Martha pressed the button. “I know.”

As the lift took her to the lower levels, Martha tried to shrug off the face of the old woman who had just told her to go to hell. She had an assignment, no matter what Harriet Jones or old German ladies thought.

But again, the Doctor’s voice suggested that maybe there was another way. That maybe, she should start by giving the Daleks a choice. Didn’t he always give his enemies a choice, a chance to do the right thing before he followed through on whatever plan he’d come up with to stop them?

The first hint of an idea formed in the back of her mind. Earth was one of twenty-seven planets. What if…

The lift stopped, and the doors opened directly onto a small station, big enough for one person only. As Martha unstrapped Project Indigo, the lights came on and the door shut behind her. Her breath caught in her throat; she had never felt more alone in her life.

She thought briefly of Tom and their ill-fated relationship. Did she feel alone partly because she’d broken up with him, or would she feel more alone if they were still together and she had to keep this from him? The same image that had convinced her to break up with him came to her again—Rose comforting the Doctor after the death of the Face of Boe. If she couldn’t have that, she would rather be alone.

She squared her shoulders and strode towards the desk chair, the Osterhagen key in hand. The rules were clear: there must be three operatives at three stations with three keys to activate the Osterhagen Key. That gave her time to come up with an alternative to blowing up the Earth.

Martha pressed the button for the secure comm link that connected the stations positioned strategically worldwide. “This is Osterhagen Station One. My name is Martha Jones. Is there anyone there? Over.”

A staticky pop and buzz came over the speaker. Martha pursed her lips—it was time to think like the Doctor, not just a doctor. There was always an alternative, if you looked for it hard enough.
The first thing Jack registered was heat. Much heat. Very hot. His eyes flew open, and he realised he was in an incinerator. Not the worst way he’d woken up after dying, but definitely not the best.

Thankfully, no one expected people to climb out of an incinerator, so the door didn’t lock and he was able to slide it up and roll out before he died again and had to think of a new plan.

Using the scanner on his wrist comp, Jack was able to get a rough schematic of the Crucible. He punched a few more buttons and managed to get it to show Dalek activity—which was pretty much everywhere.

He eyed the plans and sighed. “Ventilation shafts it is,” he muttered to himself and opened the nearest access point.

Sarah Jane, Pete, and Jackie followed the line of humans being led through the Crucible.

“Prisoners now on board the Crucible,” a Dalek said. “They will be taken for testing.”

“Testing?” Pete muttered. “I don’t know if I like the sound of that.”

Sarah Jane shook her head, then took a quick look around her, hoping to spot someone she recognised. “One step closer to the Doctor,” she said resolutely.

Rose leaned back and surveyed the console room when she got the last bits of debris swept up. The TARDIS had repaired herself when they had left the Crucible, but there had still been a little bit of picking up left for Rose to do. And honestly, she didn’t mind—it gave her time to think about what had just happened.

The moment they’d rematerialised, she’d felt the timelines settle around her in one solid path forward. She knew what she needed to do, and she knew with a certainty that was unnerving what had happened—no, what would happen.

Rose put her hand on the console and frowned down at the ship. “Can you try to think linearly when we’re connected like this?” she said, the sudden headache giving the words some bite.

The lights in the console room flashed, and the voice of the TARDIS in her mind apologised, though not without a hint of laughter. To the TARDIS, time was as natural a part of her environment as air was to humans. And like humans wouldn’t separate out the individual elements that made up the atmosphere, it was unnatural to her to divide past from present and future.

Rose rolled her eyes and brushed her hair out of her eyes. The glint of gold under her skin caught her eye again, and this time, it reminded her of something else. She’d seen that same gold at the edge of her vision in moments when the Doctor was threatened, or when they were in danger. She was the Bad Wolf, as she was meant to be.

And yet…

Rose brushed her hands over the controls on the console. “The Master said this wasn’t the prime
timeline,” she said slowly. “That the most likely sequence of events after Canary Wharf was for me and the Doctor to be separated. So how… Did I…”

_We saw all of Time, my Wolf. With the Vortex running through our mind, we saw it all. We saw the possibilities, and we found a timeline we preferred. And then, like a strand in a tapestry, we took that thread and wove it into our story._

A hazy memory shifted in the back of Rose’s mind. She’d done this. She’d set them on this path, or at least made it a possibility. Because this was how it was meant to be—the Doctor and Rose Tyler, in the TARDIS, forever.

**oOoOoOoOo**

As the Doctor and his companions were led to the Vault, he quickly ran over his hidden assets. There was Jack, who had faked his death so he could hopefully get away from the Daleks and run free through the Crucible.

Sarah Jane had been on that conference call earlier, and if he knew Sarah, she would not be content to sit at home, watching the world burn around her. The Doctor didn’t know what exactly she would be doing, but he expected her to appear at some point—likewise with the brilliant Martha Jones.

And, of course, there was Rose. Rose and their TARDIS, currently merged in the form of the Bad Wolf, listening in on the conversations going on and making plans that the Daleks absolutely would not be expecting.

Everyone would play a part, he knew. But his gut told him that the salvation of the universe would come at the hands of the Bad Wolf.

The Daleks who had delivered them to the Vault rolled back to the lift and returned to the main level of the Crucible. The Doctor stood in the middle of the room, with Jenny, Donna, and Mickey close by, and waited for Davros to speak.

“Activate the holding cells,” the mad scientist said, and the Doctor saw a glimmer of light as energy shields went up around each of them.

Jenny reached out and touched hers, and it flickered blue for a moment. “That’s weird,” she mumbled, then pressed her hand more firmly to the barrier.

“Excellent,” Davros rejoiced. He hit a button on his chair and rolled closer to the Doctor. “Even when powerless, Time Lords are best contained.”

The Doctor flicked his finger against the shield. Davros’ words made it clear he knew who Jenny was, and it struck him suddenly that his daughter was completely defenceless against his old enemy.

“Still scared of me, then?” he taunted, hoping to keep Davros’ attention focused on him.

Davros ignored his attitude. “It is time we talked, Doctor. After so very long.”

The Doctor shook his head quickly. He knew exactly where that conversation was going, and it was the last one he wanted to have with Davros. “No, no, no, no, no. We’re not doing the nostalgia tour. I want to know what’s happening right here, right now.”

He scanned his surroundings as he talked. It had not escaped him that they’d taken the lift down to get to the Vault, and now, a hilarious possibility occurred to him. “Because the Supreme Dalek said Vault, yeah? As in dungeon, cellar, prison.” He spun in a slow circle as he ticked off the synonyms.
“You’re not in charge of the Daleks, are you?” He smirked at Davros. Davros stared at him, grim-faced, and he knew he was right. “They’ve got you locked away down here in the basement like, what, a servant? Slave? Court jester?”

“We have… an arrangement,” Davros conceded reluctantly.

“No, no, no, no, no.” The Doctor rocked back on his heels and laughed at the ceiling. “No, I’ve got the word. You’re the Dalek’s pet!”

Davros jerked the joystick controlling his chair and wheeled over to Jenny, and the Doctor cursed under his breath when he realised his plan to keep Davros’ attention focused on him had failed.

“So very full of fire, is he not?” Davros asked Jenny as he rolled to a stop in front of her. “Oh, I see the same fire in your eyes. You are indeed the Doctor’s daughter.”

A growl built in the back of the Doctor’s throat, but before he could hurl useless threats against Davros, Donna’s voice drowned out his protest. “Leave her the hell alone, you big old… Skeletor look-alike.”

The Doctor covered his mouth to hide his smirk. Davros really didn’t look much like Skeletor, but he loved Donna’s creativity.

Davros’ head swivelled between Jenny and Donna, trying to decide who he should stare down. “She is mine to do as I please.”

Jenny tilted her head back and crossed her arms over her chest. “Then why am I still alive?”

The Doctor stared at the floor for a moment, working to choke back his anger and helplessness. Jenny was so much like Rose—the same fearless defiance that always terrified him at times like this.

“You must be here. It was foretold.”

Davros’ raspy voice held a note of reverence that caught the Doctor by surprise. Who exactly had the scientist found to revere?

“Even the Supreme Dalek would not dare to contradict the prophecies of Dalek Caan.”

Davros pressed a button on his chair, and a light clicked on over a Dalek mollusk lounging in his open casing. “So cold and dark,” Dalek Caan said, his tentacles moving in time with his singsong voice. “Fire is coming. The endless flames.”

“What is that thing?” Mickey asked, while Donna gasped and put her hand over her mouth.

The Doctor sighed. “That is a Dalek, Mickey. A Dalek removed from his polycarbide shell.” He looked at Donna, still staring at the grotesque mollusk-like creature with wide eyes. “Rose and I told you about them, remember?”

Donna shook her head. Her eyes were fixed on the tentacles, waving in the air. “Yeah, but you said they had… metal and stuff. That’s just…”

“This is the true Dalek form,” the Doctor explained. “What they all look like beneath the metal casing. And Dalek Caan is unique. He flew into the Time War, unprotected.”

“Caan did more than that,” countered Davros. “He saw time. Its infinite complexity and majesty, raging through his mind. And he saw you. All of you.”
The Doctor frowned, wrinkling his forehead. He knew someone else who had looked into all of time and been changed by it. Looking into the Time Vortex had revealed the true desire of Margaret the Slitheen’s heart—he could only hope that a similar experience had given Dalek Caan the same change of perspective.

“This I have foreseen, in the wild and the wind. The Doctor will be here as witness, at the end of everything. The Doctor and the Bad Wolf, and their precious Children of Time. Oh, but now the Wolf has been silenced.”

The Doctor’s hearts stuttered, and he choked on a gasp as he swayed slightly on his feet. The last time he’d been warned that the Wolf would be silenced, he’d gone without Rose and their bond for five months—three of which he’d thought she was dead.

Rose?? he called frantically, even though he could still feel her in his head.

I’m fine, Doctor, she promised. But silent, like a submarine in the movies—running silent.

The tension drained out of him, and his shoulders sagged in relief. Then another thought occurred to him, and he shoved his hands through his hair. There was no way the phrasing was an accident, not if Dalek Caan could see Time. And that meant the Dalek knew Rose was alive.

He couldn’t let anyone else pick up on that fact though, and he immediately fell back on the anger and hopeless desperation he’d felt when the Supreme Dalek had dropped the TARDIS and Rose into the heart of the Crucible.

“Was it you, Caan?” he spat out. “Did you kill Rose? Why did the TARDIS door close? Tell me!” His volume rose with each demand, until he screamed the final words. The diatribe had started as yet another way to deflect attention from Rose, but talking about how much danger she was in brought his earlier fear back to full force.

“Oh, that’s it,” Davros cried victoriously. “The anger, the fire, the rage of a Time Lord who butchered millions. There he is.”

The Doctor felt Jenny’s gaze on him, could feel her confusion in the face of his rage. Across the room, Donna and Mickey looked on sympathetically, but Jenny had never seen him out of control like this. He took deep breaths and reminded himself that Rose wasn’t actually dead—she was only silenced, as Dalek Caan had said, biding her time until it was the right moment for her to save them all.

“Why so shy?” Davros said, his voice low and taunting. “Show your companion. Show her your true self. Dalek Caan has promised me that too.”

“I have seen. At the time of ending, the Doctor’s soul will be revealed.”

The Doctor ignored Dalek Caan’s latest prophecy and focused on his daughter instead. Her eyes glinted with tears, and he realised his outburst had convinced the wrong person of Rose’s death.

“Jenny…” His mouth worked uselessly as he tried to think of some words he could offer to reassure her that wouldn’t tip Rose’s hand to the Daleks.

He shook his head, but that had the opposite effect he’d hoped for. Instead of realising he meant Rose wasn’t actually in danger, she interpreted his head shake to mean Rose was gone. A tear tracked down her cheek, and the Doctor had to choke back the reassurances that would ruin Rose’s secret plan.
He looked back at Dalek Caan before he could say the wrong thing. “What do you mean, my soul will be revealed?” he demanded.

“We will discover it together,” Davros whispered. “Our final journey. Because the ending approaches. The testing begins.”

“Testing of what?” Dread settled in the pit of the Doctor’s stomach like a lump of over-kneaded bread.

Davros had half-turned away from him, but at the question, he spun back around. He tilted his head, and his voice was chillingly matter-of-fact when he answered. “The Reality Bomb.”

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Heavy double doors flew open in front of the group of human prisoners, and they were led into an open chamber with high ceilings. “Prisoners will stand in the designated area,” a Dalek said as they were herded towards the centre of the room. “Move! Move!”

Sarah Jane stiffened when she took in the room’s stone walls and dirt floor. To most people, they would have seemed very out of place on an advanced spaceship—the overall aesthetic was more what you’d expect to find on an archaeological dig. But there was something in the design that hailed back to Skaro, and a wave of memories she’d tried to bury came back to her.

A gasp of pain pulled her back to the present danger. Sarah Jane twisted her head, trying to find the woman and perhaps offer help, but she couldn’t see over Pete’s shoulders.

“You will stand!” the Dalek ordered.

Sarah Jane realised two things in an instant: what must have happened, and that the Daleks’ attention was focused on this woman who had unfortunately fallen to the ground.

“I can’t,” the woman whimpered.

“You will stand!”

As the woman continued to plead with the Daleks, Sarah Jane scanned the room and spotted a smaller door off to the side. The Daleks hadn’t taken her sonic lipstick from her when they’d been brought on board, so unless the door was deadlocked, she had a way out.

“On your feet, on your feet!”

Sarah Jane shoved her hand into her jacket pocket as she ran for the door, pulling out the lipstick. She heard the distinctive fire of the Dalek death ray when she reached the door, and assumed the Daleks had taken another victim.

Her hands were shaking as she pointed her lipstick at the lock. Please let this work, she begged the universe. She let out a breath when she heard the latch unlock, then she looked over her shoulder while the door slid open. “Pete, Jackie!” she whispered as she left the room.

Pete stared straight ahead with his hands locked behind his head as ordered. He was so focused on Tony and Jackie and everyone in his universe that he let down that he almost missed Sarah Jane whispering his name and Jackie’s.

He let his gaze drift away from the Daleks to search for the Doctor’s friend, and his eyes widened when he saw her standing on the other side of an open door. Hope coursed through him. After
sparing the Daleks a quick glance to make sure he wasn’t being watched, he carefully shifted to the side of the room, trusting Jackie to follow.

He only looked back when he reached the door, and his stomach clenched in hard knots when he realised she was directly in front of the Daleks and couldn’t move. He pivoted, but before he could go in after her, a hand clamped on his wrist and dragged him out of the room.

Pete glared at Sarah Jane as the door slid shut. “What the hell are you doing?” He reached for the button. “I’m not leaving my wife behind!”

In response, Sarah Jane dragged him to the floor. Pete caught a glimpse of a Dalek patrolling just the other side of the door before they were safely out of sight.


The Doctor furrowed his brow. Reality Bomb? He stared at Davros, trying to understand what he was talking about.

“Behold.” Davros’ voice was shivering with anticipation. “The apotheosis of my genius.”

The view screen turned back on, revealing a crowded room full of humans. The Doctor’s gaze flicked between the screen and Davros, as he wondered what exactly the Daleks had done now. Davros bristled with pride, and the Doctor knew that whatever the Reality Bomb was, it was bad news from the humans trapped in that room.

The Supreme Dalek’s countdown reached zero. “Activate planetary alignment field!” he ordered victoriously. The image on the view screen switched from the holding chamber to a quick glimpse of the configuration of twenty-seven stolen planets.

The final piece slid into place when the planets started to glow. Twenty-seven planets, like cogs in a gear, and a space station with a heart of Z-neutrino energy.

“That’s Z-neutrino energy, flattened by the alignment of the planets into a single string,” he muttered. The image switched back to the prisoners, and the Doctor’s hearts thudded painfully in his chest as the final piece fell into place.

“No!” he breathed. “Davros, you can’t!” He pressed his hands to the containment field and hissed when a charge went through his body. “You can’t!” he insisted, his shoulders heaving as he struggled to breathe.

This was why the stars were going out in that parallel world. Reality was being literally undone. The people in that testing room, all of them, were about to be reduced to atoms.

And it wouldn’t stop there. Everything and everyone would be reduced to nothing. No one was safe, not even Bad Wolf.

Pete paced the corridor, rubbing his hands over his bald head. Jackie was in there, and whatever the Daleks were planning on testing, he didn’t think it was a new line of beauty products.

Another Dalek with a deeper grating voice came over the tannoy, counting down to something. The
tension stole the last of Pete’s patience, and he reached for the door controls again. And again, Sarah Jane stopped him.

“I can’t just stand here and wait for the Daleks to kill her,” he whispered harshly.

Sarah Jane shook her head. “I know you want to save your wife,” she said, cutting off his protests. “But if the Doctor can’t stop whatever the Daleks are doing in there, we’re all going to be dead by the end of the day anyway!”

Those words reminded Pete of Jackie’s pragmatic reason for leaving Tony behind to come to this universe and help the Doctor and Rose. He took a deep breath and nodded, knowing it was what Jackie would have wanted. Choosing his son’s life over his wife’s was torture, though, and he couldn’t bring himself to watch.

Something beeped, and for a moment, he thought the weapon had fired. Then he realised he knew that sound, and he reached frantically into his pocket for his dimension hopper. The light was on, and he ran to the door.

“Thirty minutes,” he told Sarah Jane as he held the yellow button up to the window. “It’s recharged.”

He pounded on the glass porthole, hoping the sound would be enough to get Jackie’s attention. “Come on, Jacks,” he muttered, and finally, she looked up at him. “Use it,” he mouthed deliberately, pointing at the button. “Get out of there, love. Come on!”

Jackie’s eyes widened, and she slowly lowered one hand to slip it into her pocket. Pete saw her turn to the woman she was standing next to and whisper something, then she disappeared.

A second later she was in his arms. “Pete!” She clung to him. “Oh, my God, Pete! I thought I was dead!”

The exhilaration of a narrow miss coursed through Pete’s veins, and he threaded his fingers through Jackie’s hair and tilted her head back so he could press his lips to hers. Tears burned under his lids as he kissed his wife fiercely, trying to convey exactly how grateful he was to have what was now a third chance at a life with her.

Sarah Jane tugged on his sleeve, and he reluctantly pulled away from Jackie to look through the window. The room was being flooded with bright greenish yellow light. Pete’s eyes widened as one by one, the people left behind were vaporised, existing one minute and reduced to atoms the next.

The woman Jackie had tried to help was the last to go, and Jackie turned her face into his chest and whimpered when she was gone.

Even Sarah Jane’s voice shook when she said, “Come on. We’ve got to find the Doctor.”

Rose was still reining in her anger at the way Dalek Caan had heartlessly played with the Doctor’s worst memories when the TARDIS monitor clicked on. She took a deep breath, then moved around the console to look at it. There was a diagram of the twenty-seven planets at the centre of the screen, with a report of what was happening scrolling across the bottom. She read along with the text, distantly aware that the words were in Gallifreyan, but setting aside that fact to think about later.

“Single string Z-neutrino compressed…” She sucked in a breath. Rose Tyler wouldn’t know what that would do, but the TARDIS did, which meant Bad Wolf did. “No,” she breathed, touching the screen as if she could reach through it and stop the Daleks.
You cannot save those people, my Wolf, but you can save the rest of the universe. Are you ready?

It was hard to contain Rose’s compassion, but ideas were already brewing in Bad Wolf’s mind. “I’m ready.”

The image on the view screen flared with bright light. When the light faded, the room was empty. Jenny looked from the view screen to her father, who was trembling with rage behind his forcefield. He bared his teeth and turned away from the screen, his hands raking through his hair.

His reaction to the loss of those strangers made one thing very clear, even if she didn’t understand anything else she’d just seen.

Mum was still alive.

That was the only way the Doctor could possibly be more upset over a room full of strangers than he was over Rose. And if he was pretending… they must be working on a plan together.

Jenny carefully hid her relief and asked the other question baffling her. “Dad, what happened?”

Davros answered before her dad could, his crackly voice breaking slightly over the syllables. “Electrical energy, Miss Tyler.”

The creepy man wheeled his chair back over to her, and Jenny shuddered when he leered at her.

“Every atom in existence is bound by an electrical field,” he explained, his voice warbling over the syllables. “The Reality Bomb cancels it out. Structure falls apart. That test was focused on the prisoners alone. Full transmission will dissolve every form of matter.”

“The stars are going out,” Mickey said from his holding cell.

Jenny looked across the room at Mickey. That’s what had started this whole adventure, she remembered—in another universe, the stars were going out. And it was all because Davros and the Daleks had shut off the electrical signal that bound the atoms together, and had fired their weapon across time and space, and even dimensions.

“The twenty-seven planets,” the Doctor bit out. “They become one vast transmitter, blasting that wavelength.”

“Across the entire universe,” Davros crowed. “Never stopping, never faltering, never fading.”

A twisted smile curved up the corners of his mouth, and he started speaking faster and faster until the words were spilling out on top of the other.

“People and planets and stars will become dust, and the dust will become atoms, and the atoms will become nothing.” He lowered his voice, letting the ominous tone echo around the Vault. “And the wavelength will continue, breaking through the rift at the heart of the Medusa Cascade into every dimension, every parallel, every single corner of creation.”

A vicious light entered Davros’ eyes, and he pointed at the empty room on the view screen. “This is my ultimate victory, Doctor! The destruction of reality itself!”
Chapter Summary

In which Bad Wolf finally confronts the Daleks face to face and deals with them in a very unique way.

Chapter Notes

Guys. You have no idea how excited I am for this chapter. I loved coming up with a solution to the Daleks that was original and fit the restrictions I'd placed on the story--Bad Wolf, but not with the Vortex power. I can't wait to hear what you think!

When Jack had first started crawling through the ventilation ducts, his wrist comp had indicated a large group of humans gathered together in the Crucible. A moment ago, the device had beeped, and he’d watched those dots—those indicators of life—flicker out.

Before helpless rage could set in, he realised there were still three human dots left outside the Vault, and they were close by. “Right,” he muttered to himself as he shimmied through the shaft to the closest access point. “You three are about to become my new best friends.”

He popped the access panel open and rolled out onto the floor. Flat on his back, he blinked a few times, then shot a cheeky grin at the familiar woman smirking down at him. Jack leapt to his feet and snapped a salute. “We meet at last, Miss Smith.”

He glanced at the couple standing behind Sarah Jane, and his eyes widened. “Jackie Tyler! You are honestly the last person I ever expected to meet onboard a Dalek stronghold.”

Rose’s mum frowned at him for a moment, then her expression cleared. “Oh, I remember you! You visited with Rose and the Doctor once, back before he changed his face.” She gestured to the man at her side. “This is my husband, Pete.”

Jack quickly shook Pete’s hand, then scanned the small group. “We’ve got to do something to help the Doctor.”

Sarah Jane nodded. “There is something we can do.”

She took a shuddering breath, and Jack had a feeling that whatever she was about to suggest was of the last resort variety.

“You’ve got to understand,” she said hurriedly. “I have a son down there on Earth. He’s only fourteen years old.”

Pete put a hand on her shoulder and nodded when Sarah Jane turned to look at him. “You don’t need to explain to us, Sarah Jane. We have a son, too. Whatever you want to do, if it will save the people down there on Earth, and on our Earth… we’re in.”
Jackie nodded in agreement.

Sarah Jane’s jaw tightened, and any hesitation she’d displayed disappeared. “I’ve brought this.” She pulled something out of her pocket, and when she unclenched her fist, a sparkling gem fell from her hand, dangling from a chain. “It was given to me by a Verron Soothsayer. He said, ‘This is for the End of Days.’”

She handed it to Jack, and he looked from the stone to Sarah Jane and back again. “Is that a Warp Star?” he asked, hardly daring to believe what he was holding. She nodded quickly, and Jack sucked in a breath. They might just have a chance, after all.

Jackie Tyler crossed her arms over her chest. “Someone mind telling the rest of us what a Warp Star is?” she snarked.

Jack couldn’t take his eyes off the weapon as it spun and sparkled in his hands. “A warpfold conjugation trapped in a carbonised shell. It’s an explosion, Jackie.” Reluctantly, he looked at Sarah Jane again. “An explosion waiting to happen.”

Blowing up the Crucible was a last resort, as he’d suspected. But compared to some extreme measures he’d been forced to employ over the years, there was very little moral ambiguity in this plan. Destroy the Daleks, save reality. It was as simple as that.

His conscience pricked at him, and he knew there was one more thing the Doctor would want him to do before he blew up the space station. They had to give the Daleks a chance—a chance to leave and let them all live.

**oOoOoOoOo**

Martha fidgeted with a pen she’d found on the desk. Osterhagen Station Four had come online only a few minutes after she’d sent out the call, but the bloke manning the station was tight-lipped and grim-faced.

She tapped the pen on the desk while she waited for a third station to come online. She had a plan, but since the Osterhagen Keys only worked when three of them were activated, she couldn’t implement it until another operative joined them.

A burst of static caught her attention, and she looked up as the feed from China went live. “This is Osterhagen Station Five. Are you receiving, Station One?”

“I’ve got you.” Martha glanced at the two live screens. “That makes three of us, and three is all we need.”

“My name is Anna Zhou. What’s yours?”

“Martha Jones.” She looked right. “What about you, Station Four? You never said.”

The officer in Liberia shook his head. “I don’t want my name on this, given what we’re about to do.”

“So what happens now?” Anna asked, filling in the awkward silence following that grave pronouncement. “Do we do it?”

Martha shook her head. With three keys in place, they had the leverage they needed to possibly convince the Daleks to leave. They might have to use the Osterhagen Key in the end, but first…

She turned the square key over in her hands. “No. Not yet.”
Anna frowned. “UNIT instructions say, once three Osterhagen Stations are online—”

“Yeah, but I’ve got a higher authority, way above UNIT,” Martha cut in. She looked at the disk that would activate the nuclear warheads. “And there’s one more thing the Doctor would do.”

She’d thought of a way to give the Daleks a chance. Whether or not they took it would be up to them.

oOoOoOoOo

Bad Wolf felt like she was floating as she danced around the TARDIS console. Each movement she made was so automatic and sure, it was like she’d practised it a hundred times over.

“Davros gave us the key to his own downfall,” she mused. The timelines she’d sensed when he showed them his own skeletal body made sense now.

The TARDIS hummed in agreement as Rose keyed the carefully chosen coordinates into the navigation panel.

“He created the Daleks out of his own genetic material, which means…” She tapped a few buttons to test her theory and grinned when the TARDIS confirmed that genetically, every Dalek on that station was identical to each other and their creator. This plan would work.

Bad Wolf jolted slightly when she felt another mind connect with hers. She’d become so completely connected with the TARDIS as they’d worked on their plan to defeat the Daleks that every other telepathic connection had been almost forgotten.

Rose?

The name felt… wrong, somehow. Incomplete. But before she could correct the Doctor, the part of her being that belonged to Rose Tyler asserted herself. Bad Wolf remembered that while she was Bad Wolf, she was also Rose and the TARDIS, individually.

Yes, Doctor?

He hesitated for a second. Am I talking to Rose, right now? Or to Bad Wolf? I mean. I know Bad Wolf is Rose, but they’re also not Rose and I would like…

His ramble and frustrated sigh brought a smile to Rose’s face, and she reached for the bond. Bad Wolf watched as she gave the Doctor an affectionate telepathic caress that seemed so familiar. A moment later, they felt the Doctor relax under the soft touch.

If you have a plan, love, now would be an excellent time to set it in motion.

The obvious indication that they were on borrowed time brought Bad Wolf back to the front of Rose’s mind. Davros and the Daleks were threatening her Doctor. A glint of gold filled her vision as she typed the final command into the TARDIS terminal, and a moment later, her sonic screwdriver beeped as it received the software update.

She slid the device into her pocket, then pulled his sonic out of his coat on impulse and put that in her pocket as well. We’ll be there soon, she promised the Doctor. I’ll keep you safe, my Doctor.

oOoOoOoOo

The Doctor’s eyes widened when he recognised the voice of Bad Wolf. Rose still used that
endearment, but he’d never heard it spoken with quite the same intonation as she’d used that first
time—until now.

She was still Rose; that hadn’t been a lie. But her typical pink and gold telepathic aura was now shot
through with a deeper gold as the TARDIS connected her to Time.

He’d worried before that Rose’s… well, Roseness—the essence of what made her Rose—would be
subsumed if she ever merged with the TARDIS again. But in that brief conversation with her, she’d
felt just as much like Rose has she had in four years of telepathic conversation. And then the
reminder of the imminent danger had brought Bad Wolf to the fore, and Bad Wolf had been
completely Bad Wolf while still being completely Rose.

The dynamic state of being two things at once had flummoxed Christian theologians for millennia.
And now, having experienced it, he couldn’t explain her dual nature, not even with his big Time
Lord brain. He could only shrug and say, as theologians did, that it just was.

The view screen turned back on, interrupting his existential musings. The Doctor straightened up
when he saw Martha’s face onscreen.

“This message is for the Dalek Crucible. Repeat. Can you hear me?”

“Put me through,” the Doctor ordered the Daleks.

“It begins, as Dalek Caan foretold,” Davros said.

Propped up in his open casing, Caan giggled softly. “The Children of Time will gather once the
Wolf has been silenced.”

Even though he knew Rose was fine, those words still aggravated a wound that was too fresh to be
picked at. “Stop saying that.” He looked at Davros and made his demand again. “Put me through!”

“Doctor!” Martha said, and the Doctor felt a rush of relief that they could see each other. Her eyes
shifted from right to left, and he tensed in anticipation of her next words. “Where’s Rose?”

Davros rolled forward. “We took the TARDIS and Rose Tyler, and we destroyed them together.”
He rubbed his hands together gleefully. “The Doctor was powerless to help her.”

Martha blinked rapidly and opened and closed her mouth a few times. Then she tilted her head and
looked at the Doctor. “She was with the TARDIS?”

He nodded, and he hoped he was the only one who could read the relief in Martha’s posture. Like
Jack and Mickey, Martha knew enough to find a grain of hope in that fact.

“Enough chatter,” Davros interrupted. “State your intent.”

Martha held up something, and another rock landed in the pit of the Doctor’s stomach when he
recognised an authorisation key for a missile.

“I’ve got the Osterhagen Key,” Martha said grimly. “Leave this planet and its people alone or I’ll use
it.”

“Osterhagen what?” the Doctor sputtered. “What’s an Osterhagen Key?”

Martha’s shoulders lifted and fell as she drew a breath. “There’s a chain of twenty-five nuclear
warheads placed in strategic points beneath the Earth’s crust,” she explained. “If I use the key, they
detonate and… the Earth gets ripped apart.”

It was exactly the kind of ridiculous last resort weapon humans would invent. And of course UNIT wouldn’t tell him about it, because they knew exactly what his response would be.

“What? Who invented that?” The Doctor shook his head. “Well, someone called Osterhagen, I suppose. Martha, are you insane?” He regretted the words as soon as he said them, but this just sounded so un-Martha like that he couldn’t even comprehend what she was saying.

She set her jaw. “The Osterhagen Key is to be used if the suffering of the human race is so great, so without hope”—she nodded a few times, because they were almost to that point, and they both knew it—“that this becomes the final option.”

The Doctor shook his head violently. “That’s never an option.” He’d destroyed his own planet—he knew the weight of that choice. Even though he knew it had been a choice between Gallifrey and the universe, he still wondered if he could have found a way to save them all.

“Don’t argue with me, Doctor!” Martha shouted. “Because it’s more than that. Now, I reckon the Daleks need these twenty-seven planets for something. But what if it becomes twenty-six?” She held the key up, a feral smile on her face. “What happens then? Daleks?” She looked over at Davros. “Would you risk it?”

The Doctor blinked; now that sounded more like Martha.

“She’s good,” Mickey said, and the Doctor raised an eyebrow at the blatant admiration in the other man’s voice.

A second screen suddenly split off from the first, this one showing Jack, Sarah Jane, and—the Doctor gaped—Pete and Jackie. “What?” he mumbled, though really, by this point in the day, he should be beyond feeling shocked by anything.

“Captain Jack Harkness, calling all Dalek boys and girls.” Jack was holding a bundle of wires up in front of the camera. “Are you receiving me? Don’t send in your goons, or I’ll set this thing off.”

“He’s still alive?” Jenny gasped, staring at Jack. “And… Who’s that, behind Sarah Jane?”

The Doctor glanced over at his daughter, then at his mother-in-law onscreen. “Well. That’s… that’s your gran and granddad.”

He winced when Jackie shrieked, silenced almost immediately by Pete’s hand over her mouth. Off to the side in his own holding cell, Mickey chortled.

“Captain, what are you doing?” he asked Jack, choosing to focus on the universe ending and not the fact that he’d just given Jackie the biggest shock of her life. At least, he assumed meeting your alien grandchild trumped learning aliens existed.

“I’ve got a Warp Star wired into the mainframe,” Jack said, and the Doctor finally recognised what was holding the tangle of wires together. “I break this shell, the entire Crucible goes up.”

“You can’t—where did you get a Warp Star?” the Doctor asked, momentarily distracted by that curiosity.

“From me,” Sarah Jane interrupted, shaking her head behind Jack. “We had no choice. We saw what happened to the prisoners.”
Davros wheeled closer to the screen. “Impossible. That face. After all these years.”

Sarah Jane moved to stand in front of Jack. “Davros. It’s been quite a while. Sarah Jane Smith. Remember?”

“Oh, this is meant to be,” Davros breathed rapturously, and a muscle in Sarah’s jaw twitched. “The circle of Time is closing. You were there on Skaro at the very beginning of my creation.”

“And I’ve learnt how to fight since then.”

There was a bite to Sarah’s words that caught the Doctor by surprise. He looked from her to Martha, and he started to understand. They were making a stand, all of them.

Sarah Jane pressed her lips into a thin line, and when she spoke, every word was measured and sharp. “You let the Doctor go, or this Warp Star gets opened.”

“I’ll do it,” Jack promised. “Don’t imagine I wouldn’t.”

“Now that is what I call a ransom!” Donna crowed.

The Doctor pressed his tongue to the back of his teeth. This wasn’t how he would have chosen to challenge the Daleks, but he couldn’t help but be proud that none of his friends were cowering at home. They were all doing something, whatever they could.

“And the prophecy unfolds,” Davros gloated.


“The Doctor’s soul is revealed,” Caan sang. “See him. See the heart of him.”

Davros leaned back in his chair and tapped his fingers together, a vengeful smile creasing his sunken cheeks. “The man who abhors violence, never carrying a gun. But this is the truth, Doctor. You take ordinary people and you fashion them into weapons. Behold your Children of Time transformed into murderers. I made the Daleks, Doctor. You made this.”

The Doctor watched some of the fire go out of Martha, Jack, and Sarah Jane, and he shook his head quickly. “Not murderers, Davros. Defenders. Defenders of the Earth.” He nodded at Dalek Caan. “Caan was right. This shows you who I am. Not one of my friends was willing to just sit at home when you tried to take over the Earth.” A memory Rose had shared with him once came back to him, giving him the words to explain. “They didn’t give up or let things happen. They’re making a stand.”

He looked at all of his friends, now standing straight. “Would I have done things differently?” He shrugged. “Possibly. But I’m proud of all of them.”

Davros paused for a moment, and the Doctor knew his response hadn’t been what was expected. And not too long ago, he would have been lost to guilt.

“Would you still be proud of them if they gave their lives for you?” Davros challenged. “Your wife is not the only one who has sacrificed herself today, for their beloved Doctor. The Earth woman who fell opening the Subwave Network.”

“Who was that?” the Doctor asked, his stomach knotting as he braced for the answer.

“Harriet Jones,” Mickey told him.
The Doctor sucked in a breath. He’d barely thought about Harriet Jones of Flydale North since he’d had her removed from office almost four years ago.

“She gave her life to get you here,” Mickey added.

“How many more?” Davros goaded. “Just think. How many have died in your name?”

The Doctor looked at his friends, and he could see the truth in their eyes. They loved him, and they were here because of him, but not for him. They were here for the Earth, for their families, for all the people who didn’t have anyone to defend them.

And there were so many people who had made the same choice in his travels, the choice to put themselves in the path of danger to save a life or a planet. Their loss hurt, as it always did, but he couldn’t remember them without also remembering the people they’d saved. He wouldn’t cheapen their sacrifices by letting the guilt overwhelm him.

But Davros took his silence for guilty agreement, and he cackled. “The Doctor. The man who keeps running, never looking back because he dare not, out of shame. This is my final victory, Doctor. I have shown you yourself.”

Over the bond, Rose pulled him close. He felt a comforting warmth envelope him, as if she’d wrapped her arms around his waist and held him tight. For a moment, they both remembered the friends they had lost—Anita, Morvin and Foon and Banakafalata, Solomon, and so many others who had sacrificed their lives to save others.

But Davros is right, love, Rose agreed. He’s shown you how you change people, how you give them the strength to be the best people they can be. She pressed a kiss to his cheek. And he’s shown me how much you’ve changed. I’m so proud of you for understanding the truth.

The silence hanging in the Vault was heavy with emotion, but the Supreme Dalek didn’t let it sit long. “Enough. Engage defence mechanism zero five,” he ordered abruptly.

Onscreen, Martha stood up, holding the missile key in her hand. “It’s the Crucible or the Earth,” she said, delivering her ultimatum.

“Transmat engaged,” a Dalek said, and blue light engulfed Martha.

“No!” she shouted. The Osterhagen Key fell useless to the ground as she was transmatted to the Crucible.

On the other screen, Jack, Sarah Jane, Jackie, and Pete disappeared as well. They reached the Vault at the same time and almost the same place as Martha, and when Martha stumbled into a rolling landing, Jack helped her to her feet.

“I’ve got you. It’s all right.”

“Don’t move, all of you,” the Doctor warned his friends. “Stay still.” He reached for them, then silently cursed the containment field that was in his way.

“Guard them!” Davros cried, pointing at the newcomers. “On your knees, all of you. Surrender!”

Martha, Sarah Jane, Jack, Jackie, and Pete all looked to him for guidance, and the Doctor nodded his head quickly. “Do as he says.”
A Dalek slowly rolled towards them, and Jackie was the first to get on her knees with her hands behind her head. Pete was right behind her.

Mickey put his hands on his hips and glared at Pete. “I can’t believe you brought Jackie.”

Pete rolled his eyes, and the Doctor could guess the truth before he said it. “She came on her own.”

Jackie tilted her head back and scowled at the Doctor. “Good thing I did, or I wouldn’t know I had a granddaughter.”

“The final prophecy is in place,” Davros purred as he rolled towards them. “The Doctor and his children, all gathered as witnesses.”

Jack and the Doctor exchanged a glance—Jack questioning, the Doctor trying to reassure him without words that there was a plan in place.

Davros looked up at the main level of the Crucible above them. “Supreme Dalek, the time has come.” He pointed victoriously at the ceiling. “Now, detonate the Reality Bomb!” he shrieked, the words echoing through the Vault.

The floor vibrated as the mechanism was set in motion. At the same time, the Doctor felt the TARDIS shift into the Time Vortex.

“You can’t, Davros!” he insisted, continuing to play his part. “Just listen to me! Just stop!”

Davros threw his head back and laughed, sounding every bit like the mad scientist he was. “Nothing can stop the detonation. Nothing and no one!”

The Doctor couldn’t hide his smirk when he heard the first hint of the familiar sound of the TARDIS engines, a second before anyone else caught it. Dalek Caan giggled, and the Doctor shot him a quick glance, still unsure exactly what role the insane Dalek had played in the events of the day.

Wind rushed around them as the outline of the TARDIS appeared. “But that’s the TARDIS,” Donna said. “I thought… and Rose…”

Mickey shook his head. “Rose Tyler in the TARDIS? That’s a hard combination to beat.”

Jenny’s blue eyes sparkled with excitement. “Oh, I knew it!” she crowed, clapping happily and bouncing lightly on her toes.

The TARDIS materialised on the edge of the room, and Davros rolled back a few feet. “Impossible,” he whispered.

The Doctor rocked back on his heels, with his hands stuck in his pockets. “Oh… I learned a long time ago that nothing’s impossible for Rose Tyler.”

After kissing the Doctor’s cheek and letting him know how proud she was of him, Rose pulled back enough from the bond to focus on the details of her rescue. That moment with the Doctor had served a second purpose. She’d been able to see the Vault through his eyes—important, because the success of the next part of the plan was largely dependent on the selection of her hiding place.

She’d just settled on a small corner tucked away behind a computer terminal when the image on the monitor flickered and then changed to show the arrangement of planets glowing again. Her eyes
widened, and she took a deep breath and looked at the time rotor.

“Are you ready, old girl?” Out of everything they’d planned, this was the part that seemed the most incredible to Rose. Bad Wolf knew it would work; Rose Tyler thought it was almost impossible.

*I am part of you, my Wolf, just as you are part of me,* the TARDIS reminded her. *We don’t need the power of infinite Time to travel through time and space.*

Rose nodded. “All right then. Let’s do it.” The time rotor moved up and down, and at the same time, the console room faded from Rose’s sight as she sent herself separately into the Vault.

Rose had used a Vortex Manipulator before, but that was nothing like travelling through the Vortex as one who belonged there. Time whipped around her as she crossed the short distance, until she rematerialised behind the computer terminal, exactly as she’d planned.

The gold haze was still clearing from her vision when Rose peeked around the edge of the computer terminal to assess the situation. In addition to everyone who had been in the TARDIS, Martha and Sarah Jane were there along with—Rose had to press her hand to her mouth to stifle her gasp—her mum and Pete.

Every eye was focused on the TARDIS, who had positioned herself on the edge of the room. Hidden safely from view, Rose watched the Doctor. He was rocking back on his heels with a smug grin on his face.

“Oh… I learned a long time ago that nothing’s impossible for Rose Tyler,” he told Davros, in response to a comment Rose hadn’t heard.

For a moment, Rose’s grin matched his. Then a mad glint entered Davros’ eyes and he pointed a shaking hand at the Doctor. “Exterminate him!” he shrieked, angry spittle gathering on his chin.


With the threat to their Doctor, Bad Wolf once more moved to the front of Rose’s mind. Her fingers danced over the controls on the terminal until she found the ones she needed and pressed them gleefully.

A low hum echoed around the room as every single Dalek weapon was rendered useless. The Daleks circling the Doctor looked down at their death rays, like children whose favourite toys had been taken away.

“Weapons non-functional,” they croaked morosely.

Rose straightened up so they could see her. Gasps echoed around the Vault and her mum cried her name, but Rose focused on Davros, whose hollow eyes glared at her balefully.

“Yeah, did you really think I was going to let you kill him?” she demanded. “I might not be able to stop your laser bolts in midair anymore, but I can still shut all your weapons off thanks to this handy terminal that lets me into your mainframe. So you might as well just point those egg beaters somewhere else, because they aren’t going to do you any good.”

The Doctor blinked rapidly. “How did you get over there?” he asked, looking from her to the TARDIS and back again.

Rose winked at him. “Bad Wolf means I’m both me and I’m the TARDIS. Anything the TARDIS can do, I can do. Such as disappearing from one place and reappearing in another.”
The Doctor opened and shut his mouth a few times before finally shaking his head. “Of course you can,” he said, a smile stretching across his face.

Flush with the success of her first task, Rose jumped when the Supreme Dalek started the final countdown to detonation. She’d almost forgotten about the Reality Bomb. Davros turned the view screen back on, and they all watched the energy being channelled through the twenty-seven planets.

Davros steepled his hands together and a malicious grin stretched his face unnaturally. “Your mate is alive, your TARDIS is here, and yet you are still helpless, Doctor.”

“Detonation in twenty rels,” the Supreme Dalek announced over the tannoy.

“Stand witness, Time Lords,” Davros whispered as the Supreme Dalek continued the countdown. “Stand witness, humans. Your strategies have failed, your weapons are useless, and—Oh.” His lips twisted into a mocking smile. “The end of the universe has come,” he said as they all watched the glowing planets.

Rose rolled her eyes. “Or, I don’t know.” She pushed another button on the terminal, and the ominous buzz of energy building in the weapon faded as the Z-neutrino relays were shut down. “Maybe not?” she said nonchalantly when the view screen turned off.

The Doctor laughed as an alarm sounded through the Vault. Davros and the Daleks were rolling around, completely baffled, but he knew exactly what had happened.

“System in shutdown,” said one Dalek.

“Detonation negative,” another announced.


“You’ll suffer for this,” Davros cried and pointed his finger at Rose.

The Doctor frowned; what exactly did Davros think he was going to do by just pointing a finger at Rose? Then he saw the bolt of energy travelling down the scientist’s arm, and his gaze flew to Rose.

Rose just smirked and pushed a button on her computer terminal, and the electrical bolt that was travelling down Davros’ finger reversed and he electrocuted himself, instead of Rose.

Davros shrieked in pain when the electricity engulfed him, and the Doctor laughed again. “Hoisted by your own petard, Davros.”

“Seemed fitting,” Rose said, her tongue peeking out behind her teeth.

“Oh, I absolutely agree,” the Doctor said. “Bad Wolf, saving the day single-handedly.”

Rose raised an eyebrow at him. “Well, you could help if you wanted. Why’re you just standing over there?” she asked. The Doctor tapped the side of the holding cell, and she nodded quickly. “Oops! Sorry, Doctor.” She bent over the terminal for a moment, then smiled up at him. “That should do it.”

He saw the containment field shut off and ran over to her while she pressed another button that sealed the Vault off from the rest of the Crucible. “Rose Tyler,” he breathed as he pulled her into his arms, unable to resist a quick hug. The golden energy he could see fluctuating beneath her skin sent a charge through him when he touched her. “You are so impressive, love.”

She spun out of his arms and shot him a cheeky grin. “Oh, I know,” she promised him. “And now I
think it’s time to send some planets home. We’ve stopped the bomb—let’s completely dismantle it.”

“Stop them!” Davros ordered hysterically. “Get them away from the controls.”

Rose rolled her eyes and worked quickly at the terminal. “You’re so fond of those holding cells; why don’t you spend some time in one yourself?”

The Doctor rubbed his hands together gleefully as the blue energy walls of the containment fields lowered. A large wall separated Davros and the bulk of the Daleks in the other half of the room, where they couldn’t do any damage. The rest she trapped in groups of two or three.

I don’t know why you wanted my help, Rose. You seem to be handling them by yourself just fine.

Rose looked back at him over her shoulder, one eyebrow arched seductively. There are lots of things I can handle by myself that are more fun with your help.

The Doctor choked on his laughter and tugged on his tie. You’ll have to show me later.

Oh, I will.

He laughed when Rose winked outrageously before bending over the computer terminal. Her lips moved as she muttered to herself, and he rocked back on his heels to watch her work. All teasing aside, she really did have things nicely handled all by herself.

The sound of Daleks spinning in helpless circles caught his attention, and when he looked away from Rose, he saw their entire family watching them. Jenny, Donna, Jack, Martha, Mickey, Sarah Jane, and Pete and Jackie—all alive because of Rose.

The Doctor frowned when Jack broke away from the group and ran into the TARDIS. What is he up to?

Jack had to hand it to Rose; so far, every one of her plans had been flawless. She’d arrived at the perfect moment, eliminated the Dalek threat, stopped Davros from blowing up all of reality… He scanned the Vault, his eyes never settling in one place for long. Things were going perfectly, and it was his job to make sure there were no hidden surprises.

Unlike everyone else, he hadn’t laughed when Rose trapped the Daleks behind the containment fields. Rose had taken care of the Dalek threat in the Vault… for now. But these weren’t the only Daleks around, and he was under no illusion that the Supreme Dalek and his pals upstairs would let them ruin all their hard work.

He shook his head and ran into the TARDIS. The guns he and Mickey had brought with them were just inside the door, and he grabbed them and ran back out.

“Mickey!” His friend spun around, and Jack tossed the second weapon to him.

“What are you doing, Jack?” the Doctor demanded as Mickey caught the gun handily.

Jack shook his head. “Just being prepared for the worst,” he explained. “Rosie here seems to have everything well in hand, but… well, I’d rather not be caught off-guard.”

Bad Wolf felt a wave of affection and appreciation for this human she had condemned to eternity. There were reasons for that, reasons that he wouldn’t fully understand until he used his last breath to offer the Doctor and Rose a warning they wouldn’t understand until it was too late. But despite the fact that Time had insisted on this path, her humanness deeply regretted the pain it had caused him.
The Doctor opened his mouth to protest, and Rose put her hand on his arm and smiled up at him. “It’s fine, Doctor. Now. We’ve got twenty-seven planets to send home. Activate magnetron.”

“Stop this at once!” Davros cried futilely from the other side of the containment field.

She snorted. “You’re not really in a position to be making demands,” she pointed out. Then she turned and looked at the Doctor, one eyebrow raised. “Ready to finish this?” she murmured.

The Doctor caught her hand and pressed a kiss to her fingers. “I’m always ready to save the universe at your side.”

He took his place on the other side of the terminal. They each reached for a pair of rods that would demagnetise the planets and send them home where they belonged.

“Off you go, Clom,” the Doctor said. “And back home, Adipose Three.”

Rose’s fingers tingled as she pulled on her controls. “Shallacatop, Pyrovillia, and the Lost Moon of Poosh. All back where you belong.”

The power meter dipped, and Rose tossed the Doctor his sonic screwdriver. “Can you take care of that?”

He caught the tool handily, with a toothy grin on his face. “I’m on it.” He bent down and shifted a few settings on the terminal, letting them reroute power from areas of the Crucible that didn’t need it.

During the brief lull in activity, Jenny jogged over and wrapped Rose in a hug from behind. “I thought you were dead for a little bit,” she whispered.

Rose squeezed Jenny’s hands, then pulled her around to stand beside her. “But I’m here now,” she said softly.

“Yeah, about that,” Donna started. Then she stared at Rose and blinked a few times. “You’re… glowing,” she said. “I mean, never mind the rest of it—how you survived the Z-neuron energy or whatever it’s called, and how you even got here… Your skin is glowing, Rose.”

Jackie left Pete standing with Mickey and walked over to them. Rose winked at her over Donna’s shoulder, then said, “I get my youthful glow from my mum.”

Jackie snorted. “Oh, don’t even try it. There’s no beauty creme that can do that.” She took Rose’s hand and held her arm up. “You can see the light shifting, look. So, come on then—what’s this mean, you’re part you and part TARDIS?”

The Doctor straightened up from the terminal and exchanged a grin with Rose. “Well, for one thing,” the Doctor drawled as they continued sending planets back where they belonged. “You know how you and Donna are always teasing me about Rose being a better driver than I am, Jenny?”

“That’s because she is, Dad,” Jenny said frankly.

“Oi!”

Rose giggled as she sent Woman Wept back to its home system. “And this is why. I promise we’ll explain it better later when we have more time, but the short version is that I can… merge with the TARDIS.”

“My daughter is part spaceship,” Jackie said faintly.
Donna looked from the ship back to Rose, who nodded, encouraging her to continue. “And while
the ship was landing, you materialised over here, just like she does.”

“Exactly!” Rose bobbed her head. “You’re brilliant, Donna.”

For once, Donna didn’t argue.

Just as the Doctor was congratulating himself and Rose for handling that complicated explanation,
Jackie narrowed her eyes at him. The Doctor stared back at her with a sinking feeling in the pit of his
stomach.

“Well, that’s one question answered,” she said. “But I’ve got another one. How long has it been for
you two, if this is my granddaughter?” She pointed to Jenny and lifted her chin in challenge.

The Doctor winced when Rose looked up at him, her eyes wide. “You told her?” she hissed.

“It just slipped out!” He pulled his rods again and sent Callufrax Minor and Jahoo back. “And
Jackie, it’s not like that,” he continued. “Jenny is…”

_Don’t you dare tell my mum your daughter isn’t mine!_ Rose ordered.

And just in time. The Doctor snapped his mouth shut when he realised exactly how that would have
sounded to Jackie. “Um… it’s complicated,” he said, his voice weak.

Thankfully, Davros started talking again, interrupting any other questions Jackie might have had.
“But you promised me, Dalek Caan.” He spun in his chair to look at Dalek Caan. “Why did you not
foresee this?”

Dalek Caan cackled, confirming the Doctor’s suspicions. “Oh, I think he did. Because someone was
there the whole time, making sure we got the information we needed. Who made sure that fortune
teller on Shan Shen would target Rose, so she’d get the glimpse of the alternate timelines and dream
of Mickey telling her the stars were going out?”

“This would always have happened.” Caan waved his tentacles. “I only helped, Doctor.”

“You betrayed the Daleks?” Davros asked incredulously.

Caan’s single eye glared at Davros. “I saw the Daleks,” he corrected hotly. “What we have done,
throughout time and space—I saw the truth of us, Creator, and I decreed, ‘no more!’”

A shudder ran through the Doctor. He had used those words once too, to declare an end to the Time
War. They’d beat a steady rhythm in his head through those final days of the war—no more.

He felt a hand slip into his, and he looked over at Rose, who’d left her side of the console to offer
him this little bit of comfort.

A hatch opened in the ceiling, and Jack lifted his weapon when the Supreme Dalek slowly lowered
himself into the Vault. “Heads up!” he called out.

“Davros, you have betrayed us,” the Supreme Dalek said ominously.

“It was Dalek Caan,” Davros protested.

“The Vault will be purged. You will all be exterminated,” the Supreme Dalek said, then fired a laser
bolt at the control panel, sending Donna and Jenny to the floor.
Jack shook his head and primed his weapon. “Like I was saying, feel this!”

He’d turned the energy blast up all the way, and the broad beam was powerful enough to blow the top off the heavily armoured Dalek.

The Doctor barely noticed Jack dispatching the Supreme Dalek. As soon as the blast had sent Jenny and Donna flying, he’d ducked around the computer terminal to check on them.

“You all right?” he asked in a low voice as he helped them to their feet.

Donna put a hand to her forehead and shook her head slowly. “Fine, Spaceman. I think I might have a bit of a headache later, though.” She gestured at the terminal. “Go on, finish up here so we can go home.”

“Easier said than done,” Rose said. “That blast destroyed the magnetron. We managed to get every planet back where it belonged first… except one. And guess which one that is.”

The Doctor turned and looked at her. “If the Earth is the only one left, we can use the TARDIS to take it home.”

Rose stood up from where she’d crouched behind the terminal, and for a moment, the Doctor thought he saw a glint of gold in her eyes. “You take care of the Earth, my Doctor. I will take care of the Daleks.”

The Doctor looked at her, then at Davros. “I’m on it,” he promised. Then he reached up into the mass of wires dangling over the computer terminal. Rose could see the plans in his mind as easily as those in her own, and she knew he was stabilising the atmospheric shell around the Earth so it would remain in place while they pulled the planet back to the solar system.

Bad Wolf looked at Davros, who was now cowering in his chair after seeing the amount of firepower Jack carried. The TARDIS had nearly lost her Thief and her Wolf to this race too many times to count. She knew this would not be the last time they were a threat, but it was time to end this round.

“The prophecy must complete,” Dalek Caan said.

Bad Wolf nodded and pulled her sonic screwdriver out of her pocket, then carefully checked the setting.

“Don’t listen to him,” Davros ordered.

At the same time, the Doctor pushed a wave of confidence and trust towards her. *Do what needs to be done, Rose,* he said as he jogged into the TARDIS.

Dalek Caan didn’t seem to be bothered by the Doctor’s sudden disappearance. “I have seen the end of everything Dalek, and you must make it happen, Bad Wolf.”

The sympathy Rose felt for this one Dalek brought her mind to the forefront. She nodded. “You’ll be alone,” she warned him. *Well. At least until the station breaks down completely from the pressure of having a wormhole open up in the centre of it.*

Dalek Caan waved a tentacle at her, and she knew he understood his fate. “I will die, Bad Wolf. And I am ready. Are you?”

In answer, Rose flipped the switch on the computer terminal that turned off the containment fields.
Then she held up her sonic screwdriver and depressed the button. The air rippled at the centre of the Vault, then like a curtain on a play, it parted to reveal a shimmering wormhole.

Davros was the first to be pulled into the wormhole. His chair skidded over the floor as he worked with his joystick frantically, trying to stay on the Crucible.

“You, Bad Wolf!” he shrieked as he reached the event horizon. “Never forget that you did this!”

Rose crossed her arms and watched as the Daleks were pulled into the wormhole one by one. She wouldn’t forget she’d done this, but she wouldn’t regret it either—not if it meant saving the Doctor and the Earth and all of reality.

A loud cracking sound warned her that the power of the wormhole was already damaging the integrity of the station, and she turned to her family. “Get into the TARDIS,” she hollered as the computer terminal caught on fire.

When everyone else faltered, too confused and overwhelmed to move, Jack pushed Donna and Jenny towards the door. “Come on, you heard the lady.” His words prodded the rest of them into motion, and less than a minute later, they were all safely on the ship.

Alone on the Crucible, Rose watched the steady stream of Daleks flowing towards the black hole. No Daleks escaped the trap. Just like what had happened at Canary Wharf, the pull was powerful enough to draw in every Dalek on every Dalek ship and from anywhere on Earth.

The Doctor came up beside her and took her hand, and together they watched in silence as the last of the Daleks was sucked through the wormhole. There was no manic energy this time, no joyful, “Pulling them all in!” Instead, they shared the quiet conviction that they’d done what had been necessary to save the universe.

The air rippled again as the wormhole closed, leaving the Vault in silence. “You must go,” Dalek Caan ordered, his voice warbling. “You must go, and I must die.”

The TARDIS knew to the second how much longer the Crucible would remain intact, which meant Rose did too. She nodded at Dalek Caan and turned to go back to the TARDIS. When the Doctor remained stationary, she paused and frowned up at him.

He squeezed her hand once, then let go. *I'll be right behind you, love,* he promised. Rose nodded, then spun around and ran into the TARDIS.

The Doctor looked at the naked form of the Dalek, struggling to reconcile his ingrained hatred with his gratitude for what had just happened.

“Thank you,” he finally told the Dalek in a low voice.

The Dalek simply waved his tentacles at him. “This was what time foretold, Time Lord. Now go!”

A beam fell from the ceiling right in front of the Doctor. He stumbled back a few steps, then turned and ran for the ship. As soon as he shut the doors behind him, Rose threw the lever and took them off the Crucible, less than a minute before the explosion they both knew was coming. The time rotor started moving with a loud churning noise, and they held their breath until they felt the ship slide through the Vortex, then materialise on the other side of the Earth, safely away from the explosion.

Rose blew out a loud breath. “Well, that was cutting it a bit closer than I anticipated.”

“What exactly did you do?” Martha asked. “You just… pressed a button on your screwdriver, and
suddenly a giant hole opened up in the middle of the room.”

Rose rocked back on her heels and put her hands in her pockets, and the Doctor knew he was the only one who could see the melancholy lurking behind her confidence. “We just opened a wormhole between the Crucible and the heart of a black hole.”

The Doctor sucked in a breath at the perfection of the plan, and Rose flashed him a smile before continuing.

“And we set it to lock onto their shared genetic structure—kinda like the black hole was the positive side of a magnet, and their DNA was the negative side. They couldn’t escape getting pulled in.”

Their friends stared at her, and Rose’s eyes glinted. “It’s the perfect prison,” she stated confidently. “They’ll never be able to get out of a black hole.”

The Doctor squeezed her hand. “And a perfect prison, even an endless one, is better than genocide. You found a way to remove them from reality without killing them.”

His thumb brushed against hers. I’m proud of you.

Thank you, Doctor.

Mickey shook his head. “Yeah, it’s a brilliant plan. That’s not why we’re all looking at you like you grew another head. You opened a wormhole?” he repeated.

“You heard me say Bad Wolf is part TARDIS, yeah?” Mickey nodded, and Rose raised an eyebrow. “Well, what does a TARDIS do?”

His confused frown smoothed out. “They open wormholes.”

“Anyway!” the Doctor said, before their family could bury Rose under the deluge of questions he imagined they had. “I think we still have a planet to get home, don’t we?”

“That’s right!” Sarah Jane exclaimed. “The Earth is still in the wrong part of space.”

He grinned at her and pressed a button on the terminal, calling Torchwood. “I’m on it. Torchwood Hub, this is the Doctor. Are you receiving me?”

The TARDIS monitor turned on, showing an industrial-looking room and a frightened but determined woman. “Loud and clear,” she said. “What did you do to the Daleks? One of them had almost gotten into the Hub, and then suddenly it went flying through the air and disappeared.”

The Doctor glanced up at Rose. “Let’s just say Rose sent them packing on a one-way trip.” Rose rolled her eyes at his Aladdin quote, and he giggled happily.

“Oi!”

The sharp retort came from the Welsh woman, and the Doctor felt his ears get hot. “Yes. Sorry.” She seemed awfully familiar, to both him and to Rose. “Jack, what’s her name?”

“Gwen Cooper.”

An idea tickled the edges of the Doctor’s mind. “Tell me, Gwen Cooper, are you from an old Cardiff family?”

She blinked and nodded. “Yes, all the way back to the eighteen hundreds.”
“Ah, thought so.” He looked at Rose and they shared a grin. “Spatial genetic multiplicity.”

“Oh, yeah,” Rose agreed, sharing the memory of another Gwyneth from Cardiff with him.

“Yeah, it’s a funny old world,” the Doctor said, then forced himself back on track. He’d arranged for the atmospheric shell around the Earth to hold for little bit longer, but it wouldn’t stay forever. “Now, Torchwood, I want you to open up that rift manipulator. Send all the power to me.”

A sharply dressed man stuck his head in front of the monitor. “Doing it now, sir.”

“What’s that for?” Donna asked.

The Doctor looked up at her as he placed another call. “It’s a tow rope. Now then, Sarah, what was your son’s name?”

A bright smile crossed his old friend’s face. “Luke. He’s called Luke. And the computer’s called Mr. Smith.”

“Calling Luke and Mr. Smith. This is the Doctor. Come on, Luke. Shake a leg.” Sarah Jane had her hands clasped in front of her, and he could easily understand her anxiety.

But there was no need to worry. Luke ran into the video frame, a wide, hopeful smile on his face. “Is Mum there?”

“Oh yeah, she’s brilliant,” Rose assured him.

The Doctor enjoyed the matching smiles that lit up mother and son’s faces. Sarah Jane danced in place and cried out “Yes!” a few times as he explained what he needed to Luke.

“Yeah, we all made it out,” he told Luke. “Now, Mr. Smith, I want you to harness the rift power and loop it around the TARDIS. You got that?”

“I regret I will need remote access to TARDIS base code numerals,” the computer answered, his voice smooth and unemotional.

The Doctor straightened and raked his hand through his hair. “Oh, blimey, that’s going to take a while.”

“No, no, no,” Sarah Jane said, pushing him away from the monitor to talk to her family. “Let me. K9, out you come!”


The Doctor laughed gleefully. “Oh! Oh ho! Oh, good dog!” he praised. “K9, give Mr. Smith the base code.”

“Master.” The antenna probe in K9’s forehead extended as he rolled towards Mr. Smith. “TARDIS base code now being transferred,” he said as he pressed the probe to a port in the computer. “The process is simple.”

While everyone else was distracted by the robot dog and the activity at Sarah Jane’s house, Rose pressed her hands to the console. The Doctor watched her carefully and realised almost immediately what she was doing. The two strands of his bonds with Rose and the TARDIS separated, and the golden light pulsing under her skin flowed out of her hands and back into the TARDIS.

When Rose was alone in her body again, he wrapped an arm around her waist so no one else would
notice the way she slumped. She leaned into him and took a few deep breaths, then she straightened and smiled up at him. Thank you, love.

For a moment, the Doctor got lost in the gold flecks still glittering in her eyes. The reminder of the power she could wield—the power that came most readily to keep him safe—awed and humbled him. He returned her smile. Anything for my Bad Wolf.

“We’re ready,” Luke said.

The Doctor blinked, then looked at the monitor. “All right Luke, thank you. I’m going to end the call for now. Your mum should be home in less than an hour, all right?” Luke nodded, and the Doctor turned the monitor off.

“What now, Dad?” Jenny asked.

The Doctor pushed back from the console. “Well, now we fly the Earth home.” He hustled Sarah Jane back to her earlier position and pointed at a lever. “Sarah, hold that down. Mickey, you hold that,” he added, pointing to a dial. “Because you know why this TARDIS always is always rattling about the place?”

On the other side of the console, Rose was showing Martha, Donna, and Jenny which controls they could use. Then she took the last place, one hand resting the velocity dial and the other on the dematerialisation lever. She looked up and winked at the Doctor, and he grinned back at her before finishing his rambling lesson on TARDIS flight.

“It’s designed to have six pilots, and Rose and I do it with just two. But not any more. Look at you, flying her like she’s meant to be flown.” He patted a strut. “We’ve got the Torchwood rift looped around the TARDIS by Mr. Smith, and we’re going to fly Planet Earth back home.”

Rose picked up on her cue and threw the lever. The time rotor moved slowly, with the weight of an entire planet behind the ship, but without the clunky chugging sound that usually accompanied their flight. Mickey was doing his job then with the stabiliser. That was a nonessential step in the flight manual that the Doctor simply didn’t have hands to handle, but feeling the smoothness of their flight, he was starting to think he ought to find a way.

Pete and Jackie were standing behind the jump seat, looking uncomfortable and out of place. The Doctor circled the console and smiled awkwardly at them. “No room for us at the console, though.”

Jackie stared at Rose. “That’s my daughter.”

The Doctor nodded. “Yes, it is.”

“And she’s… She just looks like she belongs here.”

Pride beat through the Doctor’s hearts as he watched Rose operate her own controls, while also helping Jenny and Donna, who stood on either side of her. He stepped forward quickly to adjust Sarah Jane’s hold on her lever, then looked back at Jackie.

“I know this isn’t the life you imagined for Rose when she was a girl, but I’ve never met anyone in a thousand years who belonged on the TARDIS as much as she does.” He rubbed his thumb over his wedding band. “I lived this life without her for centuries, and she just makes everything so much better.”

To his surprise, Jackie suddenly threw herself into his arms. “Thank you,” she whispered into his suit jacket.
The Doctor blinked at Pete over her head, then shrugged and hugged her back. He could feel Rose gaping at them from the other side of the console.

“What are you thanking me for?” he asked his mother-in-law.

Jackie pulled back and wiped her eyes. “I knew you loved Rose, but I still thought she was just your assistant. Regular Rose, I mean—when she’s not all glow-y and getting rid of Daleks. But the golden light is gone, and you’re still treating her like your partner.”

Ah.

The Doctor shook his head. “Bad Wolf is Rose’s story, so I’ll let her explain when she’s ready. But for me…” He looked over his shoulder. Rose was leaning over Jenny’s controls, reaching for another dial. She felt him watching her, and the tongue-touched smile she gave him in reply made his hearts skip a beat. “Rose has always been my partner.”

The TARDIS hummed in his mind, and he realised they were almost to the end of the line. “Excuse me, Jackie.”

Rose already had her hand on the lever when he joined her at the console, and she arched her eyebrow when he purposely wrapped his hand around hers. The Doctor returned her smirk with one of his own.

*What was it you said earlier, love? There are lots of things I can handle by myself that are more fun with your help.*

Their laughter echoed around the console room as they threw the lever together, putting the Earth back right where she belonged.
The time rotor stopped moving after one last, hard chug. The Doctor watched his friends look at each other across the console, all with varying degrees of uncertainty. Martha and Donna both nudged Jenny, and she looked up at him.

“Is that it, Dad? Is the Earth home?”

The Doctor rocked back on his heels and nodded. “In between Venus and Mars, right where she belongs,” he confirmed.

The room erupted in cheers, and he took the opportunity to grab Rose’s hand and pull her a few feet down the corridor. As soon as they were alone, she jumped into his arms and hugged him tight.

“We did it, Doctor!”

The Doctor set her down and shook his head. “You did it, Rose.” He pushed a strand of hair back over her ear. “Blimey, love, you were…” Rose bit her lip, and he brushed his knuckles over her cheekbone. “You are incredible,” he said hoarsely. “I don’t know what I would have done if you hadn’t been here—you saved the universe today.”

Rose’s eyes glowed with pride, and she leaned into his caress. “Thank you for trusting me to do what I needed to do,” she told him.

The Doctor sighed and leaned forward. Her arms slid around his waist and she pushed herself up on her tiptoes to meet his kiss. They’d be missed soon, but they both needed this moment to reconnect.

“I love you, he told her as their lips met. Rose hummed against his mouth and slid a hand over his shoulder to play with his hair. The Doctor shuddered at her touch, and he felt her lips curve up in a smile. I love you so much, Rose.

Rose swiped her tongue over his bottom lip, and the Doctor willingly opened his mouth. I love you too, Doctor, she replied as she stroked her tongue against his.

The Doctor clutched at her back, feeling the cool texture of her leather jacket against his fingers. He’d just started to pull her closer when he heard a voice behind him.

“You know, some of us are waiting to go home while you’re back here snogging each other’s faces off.”

“Mum.” Rose groaned and hid her face in the Doctor’s chest for a moment.

Jackie snorted, and the Doctor could imagine her rolling her eyes. “Well you’ll learn soon enough, Rose Tyler, that it’s not pleasant to see someone shoving their tongue down your daughter’s throat.”

Rose made an incoherent noise of frustration, and the Doctor turned around to look at Jackie. “I think you’ll find it was your daughter’s tongue down my throat,” he said breezily. He met Jackie’s narrowed gaze with an insouciant smile, satisfied that he’d distracted her from embarrassing Rose for the moment.

Of course, Jackie wasn’t the only one who heard his parting quip, he realised when he stepped back into the console room and caught the hidden smiles and Jack’s approving grin. The tips of his ears warmed, and he jogged to the console to redirect their attention.
“And now that we have Earth back where it belongs, it’s time to get all of you back where you belong.” He quickly set the coordinates for the same park where he and Rose had said goodbye to Sarah Jane five years ago.

“First stop, Bannerman Road. Last call for anyone getting out in London.”

Sarah Jane’s eyes lit up and she was quick to pull the door open and go outside. Rose took the Doctor’s hand and they step out into the sunlight, enjoying the church bells pealing in celebration.

After turning in a circle to take in the fact that yes, she was home, and yes, the Earth really was back where it belonged, in its orbit around the sun, Sarah Jane stopped and looked at them both.

“This goodbye is quite a bit different from the first time you dropped me off,” she said finally. “That time, you left me behind to fly off alone. But now…” She gestured towards the TARDIS. “You’ve got the biggest family on Earth.”

The Doctor rubbed at the back of his neck. The notion of an extended family was honestly going to take a bit of getting used to, even though in theory, he liked the idea.

Rose glanced up at the Doctor. The long-awaited reunion with her mum loomed ahead, and the emotions were almost too much to handle. How much more overwhelming would a sudden family be to someone who had lost everyone?

She squeezed the Doctor’s hand, then moved forward to hug Sarah Jane. “And you’re part of our family, Sarah Jane,” she insisted as she stepped back. “You and Luke, who we still need to meet.”

Sarah Jane’s eyes widened, and she started backing up down the pavement. “Oh! Got to go. He’s only fourteen. It’s a long story. And thank you!” She waved to them, then spun around and ran towards home.

The Doctor and Rose watched her go, then turned to get back into the TARDIS. But before they could reach for the door, it opened from the inside and Donna stepped out.

“We’re in Ealing, yeah?” she said, looking around. “If I take the Tube, I’m only half an hour from home. And Mum and Gramps…” She shrugged and held up her phone. “They’re asking me to visit.”

Speaking of family… “Course they are,” Rose agreed. “Text me when you’re ready and we’ll pick you up.”

Donna scrunched her face. “Yeah, I don’t think it’ll take long,” she said dryly. “We’ll have tea, and she’ll fuss and moan about the government and all the imbeciles in charge.” She paused and tilted her head. “It’ll be different, knowing what she’s talking about this time though,” she added.

The Doctor laughed. “No more missing the big picture.”

“That’s right,” Donna agreed. “I’m not the old Donna anymore.” She shook her head, whipping her hair back and forth. “Anyway, I can only handle listening to her for so long before I need to get out of there. I’ll definitely text you, Rose.”

Rose pressed her lips together to hold back a snort. Having met Sylvia, she could easily imagine wanting a quick escape. “Have you got enough for the fare?” she asked.

Donna reached into the pocket of her soft brown leather jacket and pulled out a plastic card. “I’d just topped up my Oyster card when I ran into the two of you again.” She waved them towards the
TARDIS. “I’ll be fine!”

The Doctor reached for the door and held it open for Rose. Then he waved at Donna. “We’ll see you tonight,” he promised, before going inside himself and closing the door behind him.

Martha was standing along the railing with Jack, and the Doctor raised his eyebrows. “Not ready to go home yet?”

She shook her head. “Jack needs some help cleaning up the Hub, and I can contact my superiors from Cardiff.” She smiled wryly. “The New York office was destroyed anyway, so right now UNIT doesn’t even have a place for me.”

The Doctor nodded, then looked at Jack. An idea had been brewing ever since he’d seen Pete and Jackie in the Crucible with Jack.

“Before we drop you off, we have a favour to ask of you,” he said, nodding at Pete and Jackie, who were sitting together on the jump seat. Rose caught onto his thought, and her excited agreement fizzed over the bond.

“What is it, Doc?” Jack glanced at Pete and Jackie and raised his eyebrows.

The Doctor stuck his hands in his pockets. “Would you be able to help my family resettle in this universe?”

A grin stretched across Jack’s face, and he nodded immediately. “We’re getting pretty good at this business of setting up a life on Earth for people who don’t belong here. Consider it done.”

The Doctor laughed when Rose’s excitement finally spilled over. She’d barely been able to hold still while he laid out their request to Jack, and as soon as he agreed, she darted forward and grabbed his hand.

“Mum, Pete, this is Jack Harkness,” she said as she pulled him over to her parents. “He’s going to help you get your life set up back in this universe.”

Pete stood and held out his hand. “Thank you. We appreciate it.”

The Doctor bounced lightly on his toes. “Well, if that’s all settled, why don’t we go to Cardiff and you can get right on it?”

“All settled?” Jackie snorted. “I was pregnant, do you remember?”

He blinked, then nodded. “Right, that’s right.” He pursed his lips. Pete and Jackie clearly hadn’t brought their child with them when they’d come over, which meant… “I guess we need to make a trip to Pete’s World and back before the walls between the universes seal again.”

Jack clapped him on the shoulder. “I think Martha and I will get off before you go through the Void.” He looked at Pete and Jackie. “I’ll get a crash pad set up for you as soon as I get back to the Hub. Have the Doctor drop you back off in Cardiff and give me a call.”

“Cardiff,” Jackie muttered. “I know we can’t live in London, but why couldn’t it have been Birmingham, or even Manchester?”

The Doctor chose not to answer. Jackie understanding she couldn’t live in London after being declared dead was a victory he wouldn’t question.
Rose was still standing with Pete and Jackie, so the Doctor nodded from Jenny to the console. She lit up and took the controls Rose usually worked, deftly adjusting the dials and levers until the ship was ready to fly. The Doctor set the coordinates and pulled the dematerialisation lever.

“Last stop before the parallel universe,” he called out as the TARDIS took off. “Get out here if you work for Torchwood or UNIT.”

To his surprise, Mickey slung his gun over his chest. “Well, I didn’t work for this Torchwood, but I think it’s close enough to count.”

“Are you sure, Mickey?” the Doctor asked seriously. Rose was shaking her head on the other side of the room, not wanting him to say anything that might change Mickey’s mind, but as much as they’d both love to have him back in their universe, this was too permanent a decision to be made rashly.

Mickey nodded, though. “I had a good time in that parallel world, but my gran passed away. Nice and peaceful. She spent her last years living in a mansion. There’s nothing there for me now,” he explained. “Especially not with Pete and Jackie coming back.”

“All right.” The TARDIS landed, and the Doctor pointed to the door. This time, Rose stayed inside with her mum and step-dad while the Doctor escorted their passengers off the ship.

It had been sunny and warm in London, but Cardiff was grey and cool. They’d landed on the Plass, in the faint shadow cast by the tower in the weak sunlight. A strong wind caught the TARDIS door, and the Doctor pulled it firmly closed behind them.

He gestured at Jack’s Vortex Manipulator. “Still in working order, then?” he asked.

Jack nodded. “Not that I’ve used it much, but yeah. Seems to be.”

“Good. Excellent.” He looked at Martha. “Get rid of that Osterhagen thing, eh Martha? Save the world one more time.”

She nodded, a smile on her face. “Consider it done.”

The Doctor turned to Mickey. “And… Mickey the not-so-idiot.” He held out a hand, and they shook. “Thank you.”

“All right.” Mickey saluted, then turned and looked at Martha. “So. Looks like I need a new job. Think Torchwood or UNIT would be interested in hiring someone with my experience?”

Jack smirked at the Doctor over Mickey’s shoulder, and he nodded subtly. Even though Mickey had mentioned Torchwood and UNIT both, he hadn’t looked away from Martha as he spoke.

The three of them started across the Plass, Martha already animatedly answering Mickey’s question. The Doctor blinked as a new timeline opened up, one with the possibility of love and romance between two people who could understand each other when very few others in the world could.

He shook his head as he stepped back into the TARDIS. Martha and Mickey—he never would have guessed.

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When the Doctor stepped out of the TARDIS with Jack, Martha, and Mickey, Rose stayed where she was, looking at her mother. She raised her hand in a tiny wave, feeling like a little girl for the first time in years.
“Hi, Mum.”

Jackie shook her head. “Oh, come here,” she said, reaching for Rose.

Rose closed her eyes when her mum’s arms squeezed tight around her waist. “I missed you,” she whispered. “I missed you so much.”

“I missed you too, sweetheart. Soon as we’re in our new home, you come over for tea and we’ll have a proper catch-up.” Jackie pulled back and wiped a few tears from her eyes. “I want to hear all about your wedding, for one thing.”

The TARDIS door opened, and Rose looked over her shoulder at the Doctor. He raised an eyebrow and she winked in reply, then looked back at her mum.

“Well, it was one of those weird alien rituals,” she drawled.

“Anyway!” the Doctor said loudly, interrupting any response Jackie might have given. He nudged Rose telepathically, but she just smiled innocently at him. “Time for one more stop. Darlig Ulv Stranden—otherwise known as Bad Wolf Bay.”

“Oh, no you don’t,” Jackie interrupted. “You’re not taking us to Norway again.” She looked at Rose. “Can’t you get the TARDIS to land at the mansion for us?”

To the Doctor’s surprise, excitement was rolling off both Rose and the TARDIS. “Not a problem, Mum.” She slotted herself into the space between the Doctor and the console. “I knew you’d be asking that… well, earlier, and I saved the coordinates for the mansion in the computer.”

The Doctor watched her pull them up and throw the lever, then he reached for her hand.

“Bad Wolf?” he guessed, and she nodded.

The TARDIS started moving, the time rotor grinding rather than chugging as she worked to get them through the Void.

“All right everyone, you’ll want to hold on,” he warned them. “Travel through the Void gets a bit bumpy.”

“Even when Mum is driving?” Jenny teased.

“Oh, it’s about time the two of you explained how you’ve got an adult daughter,” Jackie said.

Rose took a deep breath. The Doctor had jumped in earlier when her mum’s teasing had gotten to be too much. She could handle this conversation for him.

“Well, Jenny wasn’t exactly born in the traditional sense.”

Jackie rolled her eyes. “Oh, alien weddings are one thing, but this is too much!”

Pete’s hand tightened on her shoulder. “Let them explain, Jacks,” he said firmly.

She settled back into the jump seat, but not before she looked at the Doctor and mouthed, “Pervy alien.”

“Oi!” The Doctor crossed his arms over his chest and pouted, his bottom lip jutting out. “I am not a pervy alien!” His gaze flicked over to Rose. *Though I do love knowing I can distract you just as easily as you distract me.*
Rose blinked and pulled her attention away from the Doctor’s mouth. “No, Mum,” she said, rolling her eyes fondly at her mother. “I mean, Jenny only has one parent. Technically, she’s just the Doctor’s daughter, not mine.”

It took the entire trip through the Void—a good ten minutes—to explain progenation to Jackie. But finally, just as the trip smoothed out, indicating they were in the Vortex in Pete’s World, it seemed to click.

She shook her head and looked at Jenny. “You’re only six months old then?”

Jenny bit her lip and looked at Rose, then nodded slowly. “I suppose?”

Jackie chuckled. “Well, at least Tony is actually older than his niece, though I suppose you’ll have a fun time explaining how that’s possible.”

Two hours later, the Doctor shook his head as he carried a heavy box of shoes into the TARDIS. Two doors had appeared in the corridor just off the console room when they’d landed at the mansion. One led to a guest room where Jenny was watching over Tony, who had just gone down for a nap when they’d arrived.

The other… The Doctor shouldered it open and stepped into the small storage cupboard where he and Rose had tucked away everything they’d taken from the flat. *I should’ve known your mum would want to bring everything with her,* he told Rose.

*She’s leaving behind all the people. I don’t blame her for wanting the memories.*

He set the box down with the others Jackie had packed since they’d gotten to Pete’s World. *Yes, I’m sure she has loads of memories of these boots,* he retorted drily as he backed out of the room, feeling Rose’s soft laugh in response.

The air around him seemed to shift, and he pressed his hand to the wall to keep his balance. A moment later, the door to the guest room opened, and Jenny stuck her head out.

“Dad…”

“I know, sweetheart,” he said absently, his mind already working on the calculations to take them home.

Through the open TARDIS doors, he could hear Rose explaining to Pete and Jackie that they needed to go. Jackie was still protesting when she walked into the ship a moment later, followed by Pete who carried a bulging suitcase.

Pete caught his gaze over the console and set the luggage down to close the doors.

“Thank you, Pete,” the Doctor said. “Now that the Reality Bomb never happened, the walls are starting to close again. It’s dimensional retroclosure.” Rose rolled her eyes at him, and he tugged on his ear. “Never mind. The important part is that if we don’t get home soon, we won’t be able to.”

“Then take us home, Doctor,” Pete said quietly.

The irony of those words being spoken by the one person whose home was not in the Prime Universe hung in the air, unspoken. The Doctor watched the last protest die on Jackie’s lips, and instead, she wrapped an arm around Pete’s waist.
“Tony’s still asleep?” she asked as the Doctor and Rose finalised the last of the flight plan.

“Jenny’s keeping an eye on him,” Rose promised. She slid a lever into place, then looked around the room. “Ready, everyone?” The walls were closing faster than she’d anticipated, and they needed to go now.

Sensing the same thing, the Doctor grabbed the dematerialisation lever and threw it, hard. The time rotor made a loud, grinding noise, like gears getting caught.

Rose took a deep breath and pressed her hands to the console. *Take us home, old girl,* she begged. She focused on memories of all the places the TARDIS had taken them in the last six years. New Earth, Makuyu, Barcelona, Razda, the Ood Sphere, Messaline… And Earth, over and over again. Past, present, future. *You always take us where we need to go. We need to go home.*

Finally, she felt the engine come fully to life. When she opened her eyes, the time rotor was moving freely, if a bit slower than usual.

To her surprise, everyone was looking at her with mouths agape, even the Doctor.

“What was *that*?” Jackie asked, her voice going up on the last word. “I thought you were done glowing.”

Rose looked down at her hands and realised the huon particles were visible under the surface of her skin. She shoved them into her jacket pockets. “I just had to help the TARDIS get us home.”

“Thank you, Rose,” Pete said. “We both appreciate how much work you’ve done to make this move possible for us.” That reminder calmed her mum’s natural tendency to question and debate over everything she didn’t understand.

As soon as they reached the other side of the Void, Rose’s phone chimed four times in succession. She pulled it out of her pocket, then started laughing.

“Donna’s ready for us to come get her,” she told the Doctor. “Or, in her exact words: ‘Save me.’”

The Doctor laughed as he set the coordinates. “All right then. First stop Cardiff, and then… Chiswick.”
I’m so sorry about the delay. It turns out I wasn’t just tired or burnt out. I was sick, and I’d been sick for a long time. I’m finally starting to get my energy back, so the rest of the story should be coming either on the regular weekly schedule, or close to it.

Donna sighed and leaned back from the kitchen table when dinner was over. “That was nice.”

Her mum sniffed and got up. “It wasn’t anything special, just the chops I got last week. But I suppose we ought to be grateful we’re alive to have dinner at all.”

The critical note in her voice was one Donna was intimately familiar with, and she shared a knowing look with her grandfather. Honestly, she was surprised her mum had held off this long before listing the faults of everyone involved in the events of the day.

Donna rubbed at her neck, still sore from being blasted away from the magnetron on the Crucible. Another reason not to tell her what I do.

“Giant pepper pots rolling down the street,” Sylvia continued as she started the washing up. “Just shooting everyone with lasers. Although if you ask me, whoever designed those robots really should have used something other than egg beaters. Not very intimidating, really.”

Donna barely managed to suppress a snort. Of course Mum would criticise the Daleks’ design.

“Well, they seemed to be pretty effective,” she said sardonically, “so I’m not sure they need to worry about any possible design issues.”

Her mum stopped scrubbing a plate and looked back at her over her shoulder. “Oh, you saw them? I thought you would have missed them like you miss everything else.”

The words barely stung. “Yeah, I saw them. They were everywhere, weren’t they?”

Sylvia raised an eyebrow, then went back to doing the dishes. “I suppose so. And that’s another thing! Where was the military? We had an actual alien invasion—you would think that would interest them.”

Donna rolled her eyes. “How do you know they weren’t involved?” she retorted, thinking of Jack and Martha. “Just because it wasn’t on the telly? It’s not like top-secret government agencies can really advertise what they’re doing.”

Her mum turned slowly and stared at her while leaning against the counter. “And I suppose you would know all about top-secret government agencies.” She snorted. “The only agency you’re familiar with is the temp agency.”

The throbbing in her temples got worse, and Donna pulled her phone out of her pocket. “I ought to be going,” she said as she sent a quick text to Rose, begging for a rescue. “I told my friends I’d meet them at seven, and it’s half six now.” It was only a white lie. She had told Rose her visit wouldn’t last long.
She stood up and slid her phone back into her pocket. “Thanks for dinner, Mum. I’ll ring later, all right?”

Sylvia rolled her eyes. “Oh, yes. It would be nice to know where you are the next time the world is going to end.”

“Hopefully that won’t happen for a while.” Donna winced as soon as the words left her mouth—she’d probably just jinxed them, but oh well. It was too late now.

She smiled at her grandfather. “Here, I’ll walk you up the hill before I go.”

Wilf stood up and pushed his chair in. “Yeah, all right.” The two of them walked to the back door, pausing just for a moment while he grabbed his coat.

A gust of wind blew down the hill as they shut the door behind them. “Brrr!” Donna shivered and rubbed her arms. The afternoon sun had disappeared behind clouds, and it smelled like rain.

“Here, you put this on,” her granddad insisted, draping his coat over her shoulders.

“Thanks, Gramps.” Donna pulled it tight around her and inhaled his familiar, comforting scent.

He nodded, then rested his hand on her back, leading her up the hill to their allotment. “You were there, weren’t you?” he asked as they climbed the dirt path. “Stopping those things from destroying the Earth.”

“Yeah, I was.”

“I was going to call you,” he said. “Stars kept going out, and I thought, ‘I bet Donna could help.’ And then suddenly there were planets in the sky and those pepper pots on the ground.”

Donna laughed. “They’re called Daleks. But they do kind of look like pepper pots, don’t they?”

He nodded. “Your mother might not be impressed by their design, but you’re right. It got the job done.” They reached the top of the hill and sat down on the garden bench. “I tried to shoot one of them with a paint gun—thought if they couldn’t see, they’d be disabled. But it just burned the paint off its eye stalk thing, and said, ‘My vision is not impaired.'”

Donna pressed her hand to her mouth to stifle her gasp. She vividly remembered the way the Daleks had shot Jack. He might have come back to life, but they’d killed him stone dead first. If they’d shot Gramps…

She distracted herself from that train of thought by pulling out her phone to text Rose again. If she wanted them to pick her up, she’d need to tell them where she was.

“Going back out to the stars already?”

Donna didn’t miss the wistful note in her granddad’s voice. She was ready to go home, but she’d missed him while she was travelling. “I’ve got to, Gramps. There’s just so much out there.”

“Well, you tell your friends they’d better do their best to always bring you home.” He gave her a crooked smile. “After all, what would I do without my favourite granddaughter?”

Donna snorted and leaned into his side. “I’m your only granddaughter,” she reminded him.

He nudged her side with his elbow. “Then you have to be my favourite, don’t you?”
“Oh, all right.”

A familiar, companionable silence settled over them. This could have been any one of a hundred nights she’d sat out here with him, watching him tinker with his telescope or potter around the garden. Donna’s throat closed, and she had to blink back the tears that threatened.

“Hey, none of that now,” her granddad chided. “You’ve got your life, and that’s a good thing.”

Donna sniffed. “Well, then what are we going to talk about?”

He leaned back, resting his back against the shed behind them. “Why don’t you tell me how it happened.”

She took a deep breath. “Yeah, I guess I could.” She stared up at the darkening sky, trying to remember the entire story. Exhaustion struck suddenly when she realised she’d been up for at least twenty hours, and her jaw split in a yawn. “But I don’t even know where to start,” she mumbled. “It’s been… an incredibly long day.”

“How did you even know the Earth had moved? Does the Doctor have an alert or something?”

“No, we were actually here when it happened. I mean. In the TARDIS, but parked on Earth.” Donna pursed her lips, then nodded once. “I guess that’s as good a place to start as any.”

Wilf listened intently as she told him about how they’d come back to Earth because of Rose’s dream, and how the disappearance of the planet beneath their feet had rocked the TARDIS.

She cringed internally when she remembered her panic. Rose and the Doctor both had family on Earth, but they’d kept their wits and focused on solving the puzzle instead of falling apart.

The revelation that there were space police in charge of enforcing galactic law impressed him. “Galactic law,” he echoed silently, his lips forming the words.

He laughed when she told him about following the trail left by the bees. “There’s always something those villains miss,” he crowed. “One tiny little thing they’re just too arrogant to think about.”

Donna skipped ahead then, past the introductions to the Doctor and Rose’s friends, straight to the TARDIS being taken to the Crucible.

“And that’s when we found out what the planets had been taken for. The Daleks had turned them into a Reality Bomb.” For a moment, Davros’ voice echoed from her memory, the insane cackle as he declared the destruction of reality itself.

“A what?”

She shook her head, exorcising the memory. “They were trying to erase all of reality,” she explained. “That’s why the stars were going out.”

“So how did you stop them?”

Donna hesitated. She still didn’t understand exactly what Rose had done, or how, and she wasn’t sure how much of it she should share with her granddad anyway.

She finally settled for a simplified version of the truth. “Rose managed to stay on the TARDIS when the Daleks ordered us all out. And she used the ship to dismantle the bomb. And that also got rid of all the Daleks.”
Wilf took his hat off and rubbed the top of his head. “Daleks and Reality Bombs and saving the universe,” he mumbled. “It’s not what I thought you’d be doing when you were a girl, but I’m proud of you, Donna.”

Donna flushed. “Oh, I didn’t save the universe,” she protested. “I was in a holding cell most of the time, or just standing there watching. Rose did most of the work, with the Doctor’s help.”

Her granddad shook his head. “You told me those Shadow people didn’t even know about the other planets until you and Rose brought them up. And you were the one who told the Doctor about the bees disappearing.”

Donna blinked. She hadn’t thought she’d been any help today, not really. But Gramps was right—if she hadn’t been there at the Shadow Proclamation, they might never have found the Earth at all. Rose had been the one to destroy the Daleks, with all that glowy power she had… but Donna had been the one to get them there in the first place.

“Yeah. I guess I was.”

Wilf nodded and rubbed at his jaw. “I’m proud of you, sweetheart. You’ve finally found where you belong in life. If this is what travelling with them aliens has done for you, then I’m for it.”

The wind picked up again, but this time it carried the faint wheezing of the TARDIS engines. Donna shrugged out of his coat, then kissed him on the cheek. “You know what, Gramps? So am I.”

Chapter End Notes

There's one chapter left, plus an epilogue to segue into the next story.
A knot of tension eased in Rose’s chest when she threw the dematerialisation lever to take them to Chiswick. *And then there were three*, she thought, looking across the console at the Doctor and Jenny.

It had been a long day surrounded by people—often as the centre of everyone’s attention. The quick drop-off in Cardiff had turned into dinner with her family and the Torchwood crew, taxing her even more. She felt a little guilty for enjoying the lack of conversation as they flew to Chiswick, but her mother’s constant chatter wore thin after a while.

The TARDIS hummed around Rose, and she let the ship’s presence soothe her weary mind. When she brushed her fingers over the console in thanks, the energy pulsed through her. Her connection to the TARDIS felt like a faint electrical current running through her just waiting to be switched on.

And yet… She pressed her palm to the console, and a moment later, she was certain. The sensation of being Bad Wolf was fading, the connection going dormant like it had been for years.

The TARDIS sang in her mind, and Rose smiled. Not quite as dormant as it had been, it seemed. Just, somewhere in the middle.

Across the room, the Doctor raised an eyebrow at her. Rose bit her lip; she was eager to tell him all about Bad Wolf, but not until they were alone. She let her gaze flick over to Jenny and shook her head.

*Later. After everyone else has gone to bed,* she promised him.

The Doctor held out a hand, and she took it and let him pull her into a hug. *I'm looking forward to it.*

*Me too.* Rose turned so her back was against the Doctor’s chest, his arms wrapped loosely around her waist. *I kinda wish I hadn’t promised Jenny and Donna that I’d tell them more about Bad Wolf,* she admitted. *I'm ready to be alone with you.*

His immediate, adamant agreement was obvious over the bond, and Rose put her hands on top of his. *It won’t take long,* he reassured her. *There’s not really much left to tell.*

Rose shifted her weight so she was balanced more steadily on both feet. A moment later, the TARDIS’ hard landing forced the Doctor to let go of her and stumble back a few steps.

The doors opened and Donna strode inside. “You got here just in time to keep me from getting drenched,” she exclaimed, brushing a few raindrops off her leather jacket.

“Mum was driving,” Jenny said.


Jenny and Donna exchanged a knowing glance, and behind them, the Doctor pouted. “That explains it?” he sputtered. “Explains what?”

Donna put her hand on her hip and raised an eyebrow. “Admit it, Spaceman. If you’d been driving,
you’d have been as likely to land in the Middle Ages as in Chiswick. Especially with perfect timing.”

“Come on,” Rose said, cutting off the Doctor’s protest. “Why don’t we have tea in the library? I think I promised you and Jenny an explanation.”

Donna waved her off. “Nah, I reckon we already know everything we really need to know,” she said. “I mean, I’ve always known you were a better driver than the Doctor. If you and the TARDIS are actually… connected, somehow, that only makes sense.”

Rose looked at Jenny, and her daughter nodded. “Well, if you’re both sure…” It was exactly what she wanted, but only if they were truly fine with it.

“Definitely,” Donna said. “Besides, I’m”—A yawn cut off her words—“I’m absolutely shattered. I don’t even know how long it’s been since we landed on Shan Shen this morning, but I know it’s time for me to get some sleep.” She massaged the back of her neck. “And my head is killing me,” she added.

The Doctor pulled his sonic screwdriver out of his pocket. “I can help with that, if you’d like.”

Donna looked at the device, then at him. “You’re offering to sonic me while your wife is standing right there?”

“That… it’s not… It's a tool, Donna!” His high-pitched voice drew laughter from all three women, and he rolled his eyes. “All right, go ahead and laugh. But I can actually help your headache. A burst of sonic waves can help your muscles relax.”

Donna rubbed at her neck again. “That’d be brilliant,” she admitted.

The Doctor smiled and circled the console so he was standing behind Donna. Rose watched as he waved the sonic slowly over her upper back and neck.

After a few minutes, Donna’s shoulders relaxed. She turned around and smiled. “Thanks, Doctor. It’s already feeling better.”

The Doctor slid the sonic back into his pocket, glad he could help. “The jolt of falling made your muscles tighten up. You should feel fine in the morning.”

She rolled her shoulders a few times, then poked him in the chest. “Speaking of morning. I expect someplace peaceful tomorrow, with no universe-threatening mad scientist to interrupt my shopping. Is that clear?”

“I’m surprised you’d trust me with that landing,” he retorted, even while running through a mental catalogue of possible destinations.


Laughter sparkled in Rose’s eyes. “Got it,” she agreed.

The Doctor frowned. Despite her agreement, he could tell she had no desire to be surrounded by crowds of people. He considered his list of planets. Where can we go where we can find quiet while Jenny and Donna shop? The perfect answer came to him almost immediately.

Donna yawned again, then shook her head. “Right. I’m going to bed.”

Jenny moved away from where she’d been leaning against the railing. “We’ll see you in the
morning, Donna,” she said before Donna waved and shuffled down the corridor.

Once she was gone, Jenny looked at him and Rose. “I think I’ll go to bed too.”

The Doctor turned his head slightly so Jenny wouldn’t see his smile. Rose wasn’t the only one who was impatient to talk about what had happened on the Crucible. He still couldn’t wrap his mind around how she’d managed to become Bad Wolf without looking into the heart of the TARDIS.

To his surprise, Rose grabbed Jenny’s hand and shook her head. “You don’t have to,” she protested, and then her hesitation made sense. She felt guilty for wanting to be alone.

Jenny leaned forward and kissed Rose on the cheek. “It’s fine, Mum,” she assured her. “I bet you have loads of things to tell Dad, and honestly, I’m a bit tired too.” After kissing the Doctor’s cheek, she turned and left the console room.

The Doctor cocked an eyebrow and looked at Rose. “Do you have loads to tell me?”

Rose stepped closer to him and brushed some lint off his sleeve. “Might do,” she said. “But I want to clean up first.”

The Doctor took her hand and brought it to his lips. “Lead the way, Rose Tyler.”

Their room was noticeably quiet after the busyness of the day, and they shed their wrinkled clothes and stepped into the shower without breaking the silence. The Doctor sighed when the hot water hit his back, loosening the tight muscles. As the dust from the Crucible swirled down the drain, it washed away the tension and fears of the day.

The Doctor stepped back to shampoo his hair, and Rose shifted so she was standing under the water. Her soft moan echoed his satisfaction and relief that they’d succeeded yet again in saving the world.

When they turned so he could rinse the suds out of his hair, Rose leaned against the wall of the shower, letting it support her weight. She blinked up at him through half-open eyes, and the Doctor let go of his desire to learn more about Bad Wolf, at least for the night.

“Come here, love,” he said, taking her hand and pulling her towards him. “Let’s get you cleaned up, then we can go to bed.” He started massaging shampoo into her hair before she replied, and he couldn’t tell if the sound she made was a murmur of pleasure or disagreement.

“I wanted to tell you what happened in the TARDIS,” she protested, answering his question.

He pulled the shower head down and carefully rinsed the shampoo out of her hair. “And you will,” he agreed. “Tomorrow, after we’ve both slept. We’ll drop Jenny and Donna off for some shopping, and then you and I will find a quiet place for some rest and relaxation.”

Gratitude swelled over the bond. “Thank you. I didn’t want to tell Donna no, but the thought of spending another day surrounded by so many people…”

“I know.”

Rose opened her mouth, but whatever she was planning to say was swallowed by an enormous yawn. They both laughed before finishing the rest of their shower in silence.

The pyjamas they’d left on the bathroom counter before their shower had been traded for the simple vest and underpants they both preferred to sleep in. The Doctor chuckled and shook his head at their ship’s interference.
Thanks, old girl.

Her hum turned smug, and he knew she was pleased with herself for anticipating their needs.

The bed was still rumpled from their nap on Shan Shen. The realisation of how much had happened in the last twenty-four hours finally hit the Doctor, along with a wave of weariness. He yawned while helping Rose shake out the duvet, and she nodded.

“Donna was right—it has been a long day.”

“Long and eventful.” They turned down the covers and half fell, half crawled into bed. “Was it really just this afternoon that you dreamt about Mickey telling you the stars were going out?” he asked rhetorically as the duvet settled over his torso. The TARDIS turned off the lights, and the Doctor’s eyes grew heavy.

The sheets rustled softly as Rose shifted in bed. She settled against his side with his arm draped over her back, his thumb absentlly caressing the soft skin of her shoulder.

“A really, really long day,” she mumbled. The Doctor could feel her drifting toward sleep, and he closed his eyes and let her pull him along with her.

oOoOo

The next morning at breakfast, the Doctor surprised everyone by announcing that he’d made all the arrangements for their holiday while everyone else was asleep. Rose bit her lip to hold back her laughter when Donna boldly questioned if he had any idea where she and Jenny would want to go. Her scepticism melted into excitement when he said he’d booked them a suite at a posh hotel in Paris, and she jumped up and hugged him when he held out two debit cards linked to his bank account.

“What planet is Paris on, Dad?” Jenny asked once Donna calmed down.

Donna cut in before the Doctor could explain, telling Jenny all about the city over breakfast. Her excitement was catching, and the two of them rushed through their meal so they could get packed.

In less than two hours, they were dropping Jenny and Donna off around the corner from their hotel. Rose smiled and hugged them both, then closed the door and looked at the Doctor, leaning against the console looking very pleased with himself.

“Yes, you gave them the perfect holiday,” she agreed as she walked down the ramp. Standing in front of him, she put her hands on the lapels of his Janis Joplin coat and tugged. “But what about us? Where are we going for the week?”

Instead of answering, he stretched out and threw the dematerialisation lever. Rose swayed with the movement of the ship when they shifted into the Vortex, and he raised his eyebrows.

“You can sense how she’s going to move. That’s why you didn’t fall when we landed in Chiswick yesterday.”

Rose’s hands clenched reflexively around his lapels, and his hands shot out to grab onto her hips moments before they landed hard at their mystery destination.

The Doctor shook his head. “That is going to be very useful.”
Rose ignored his muttered aside. Instead, she looked over her shoulder at the door, then spun around and ran for it. A gust of cold air blew into the TARDIS when she pulled it open, and she had to blink a few times in the hazy light before she realised that wherever they were, it was snowing.

The Doctor came up behind her and pointed towards the right. Rose’s eyes widened when she spotted a lovely Alpine chalet nestled in a small copse of trees.

Her mind was already conjuring images of cuddling in front of the fireplace when the Doctor pulled her close and rested his head on her shoulder. “Someplace quiet where we can be alone and rest, without any interruptions,” he murmured in her ear.

“Exactly what I wanted,” she agreed, smiling when she heard his pleased hum.

“Then let’s go inside. I’m sure you’re getting cold standing there in only a jumper.”

Rose shivered, then put on the warm coat she kept by the door while the Doctor picked up the suitcase he’d packed. He closed the TARDIS doors behind them, then led the way to their home for the week.

She raised her eyebrows when he used the sonic to unlock the door instead of a key. “Did you actually rent this, or are we taking advantage of an empty home?” she teased.

He rolled his eyes. “Give me a little credit, please. It’s just easier to press a button than to slide a key into a lock.” He gestured towards the stairs with his chin. “Come on, the bedroom is upstairs.”

Rose peered into the living room as they walked by. A large, fluffy rug in front of the fireplace caught her eye, and the romantic notion of making love in front of the fire struck her fancy.

The Doctor paused on the top stair when he saw the sensual images going through Rose’s mind. He closed his eyes and imagined the way the shifting firelight would play across her body as they moved together.

He heard Rose stifle a gasp and knew if he looked back at her, her pupils would be dilating. A moment later, she put her hand on his back and pushed gently.

“Later,” she promised. “First I want to tell you what happened yesterday.”

It took them half an hour, but finally they had a fire going and tea made and they could sit down on the couch. Two large windows flanked the fireplace, and outside, the snow still fell.

Rose took a sip of her tea, then set the cup down on the coffee table. “This is perfect, Doctor. Yesterday was amazing, but a bit overwhelming. I really need a break to recharge.”

The Doctor tugged on his ear. “You can tell me about Bad Wolf later, if you’d like,” he offered.

She turned to face him, one eyebrow arched knowingly. “You could put your curiosity on hold?” She shook her head before he had a chance to answer. “No, I really want to tell you now. It’s just… finding the right place to start…”

“How did you know to stay in the TARDIS?” the Doctor asked. “If you hadn’t… if you’d gone out into the Crucible with the rest of us, none of it would have happened.”

Rose’s gaze went distant, like she was listening to something he couldn’t hear. The Doctor started; he’d seen that look more than once the day before, but it was only now that he understood what it meant.
“The TARDIS sang to me,” she said, her voice soft and ethereal, floating around him like a breeze. “It started on Shan Shen, when we saw the words Bad Wolf everywhere.”

“And it happened again at the Shadow Proclamation,” he said, remembering the moment he’d felt Rose’s attention shift from the present to some point in the future.

“Yes. And when I tried to follow you, I heard the song again. Louder than before, calling me back.” Rose blinked, and her eyes were clear again. “Walking towards the door felt… wrong. So I stopped, and when she closed the doors I knew what I needed to do.”

The Doctor stared into the fire as he fought back the memory of that moment. Being cut off from Rose, helpless to do anything to keep her safe, that had been one of the most terrifying moments of the day. Even though he knew now that everything had turned out perfectly, he still didn’t like to think about it.

He swallowed hard and skipped over the next part of the story—the part where he’d thought she would die in a sea of Z-neutrino energy. “I didn’t think it was possible, but you became Bad Wolf without looking into the Vortex. What... How...” He sighed and raked his hand through his hair. “How could you merge with the TARDIS like that without looking into her heart?”

“I told you ages ago, remember?” Rose straightened and lifted her chin. “I create myself, and I cannot be uncreated.”

A shiver ran down the Doctor’s back. “You didn’t tell me that, Rose,” he said gravely. “The representation of Bad Wolf in your mind did.”

“I know.” She closed her eyes, and he felt her reach for the TARDIS. When she looked at him again, her irises were ringed with gold. “I am the Bad Wolf.”

The Doctor watched the now-familiar glow shift under Rose’s skin. He’d seen it several times yesterday—but he’d seen it before, hadn’t he? In London, underneath the Thames, when their proximity to huon particles had activated the part of the TARDIS still remaining in Rose.

“The huon particles. They weren’t an accident of Bad Wolf. You left them there purposely to create a way to merge with the TARDIS again without risking the power of the Time Vortex.”

His forehead wrinkled in a frown when another thought followed almost immediately. “Huon particles... How are you feeling, Rose?” He studied her face, looking for any hint of fatigue. She’d been exhausted the day before; was that because of the long day, or because being Bad Wolf had taxed her body?

Rose put her hand on his knee and squeezed. “I’m fine,” she assured him. “That was my first thought too, but the TARDIS said the huon particles only wore me out before because of the Time Vortex. Now that we’ve connected without the Vortex, the huon particles have stabilised.”

The Doctor narrowed his eyes. “Corporeal beings shouldn’t be able to withstand any kind of extended exposure to huon particles at all,” he countered. His hands twitched and clenched into fists—he’d only accepted the notion of her huon particles because they were inert. This changed everything. “The fact that you’ve been living with them in you for years with only occasional exhaustion as a side effect is hard enough to believe, but now even that isn’t a problem anymore?”

Rose crossed her arms over her chest, and he realised he might have sounded a little condescending. He smiled ruefully and uncurled his fingers, and her forehead smoothed out.

“I understand why this is hard for you to believe, Doctor,” she said, her voice gentle but firm. “But
the huon particles—this connection to the TARDIS—it’s a gift.” She took a breath. “This is how she pulled me back to you when I fell through the Void.”

It had been over four years, and they’d been through far worse separations since. But the memory of watching Rose fly towards the open breach was as vivid as if it had happened yesterday. The pain of pressing himself against a barren white wall until the last remnant of their bond tore echoed back through the years, and he reached out and pulled her into his lap.

A moment later he felt Rose’s lips against his temple and her soft telepathic voice whispering words of comfort in his mind. The memory receded, and he relaxed into her embrace. Rose smiled against his skin, then trailed kisses across his face until the Doctor turned his head to meet her lips in a kiss.

*I’m here now, and I’m never going to leave you,* she promised as they kissed. *Forever and never apart, remember?*

The Doctor hummed in agreement, then gently pulled out of the kiss. Rose pressed her forehead to his, and he closed his eyes and basked in the quiet intimacy.

*I’m holding you to that,* he told her. *You’re stuck with me, Rose Tyler.*

Rose laughed quietly, and when she leaned back, he could see the happiness sparkling in her eyes. “Stuck with you’s not so bad.”

The familiar exchange finally put the Doctor completely at ease. “So, if I have the huon particles to thank for not losing you to Pete’s World, I suppose it would be hypocritical to be upset that they’re still a part of you.”

A new thought occurred to him. “In fact…” he said slowly, thinking back to another recent encounter with Bad Wolf.

Rose loved to watch the Doctor think. Right now, his tongue was pushed against the back of his teeth, and she knew that meant puzzle pieces were falling into place in his brain. She leaned back slightly against the arm of the couch and waited for him to share his conclusion, when he got there.

She didn’t have to wait long. His pensiveness shifted to almost giddy excitement, and his eyes widened. “She used your connection to bring you back to her, and I think you’ve done the same thing.”

Rose blinked. “What are you talking about?”

He nodded quickly, and Rose knew that if she weren’t sitting in his lap, he would have gotten up to pace in front of the fireplace. “I suspected when we were in the Library, but now I’m positive. She didn’t send herself through the Vortex, Rose. You called her to you.”

Rose automatically opened her mouth to protest. She couldn’t do that. But in the back of her mind, the TARDIS’ song deepened before the ship’s presence wrapped around her the same way it had when she’d confronted the Vashta Nerada.

She’d felt the barely-leashed power of Bad Wolf longing to snap free that afternoon, even though she hadn’t quite recognised it for what it was. Now she knew. It was the TARDIS answering her call.

“Something of her in me, and something of me in her,” she whispered through suddenly-dry lips. “Bad Wolf will always bring us together.”

“So it seems.” The Doctor straightened up and glared through the window at the TARDIS, covered
in a blanket of snow. “Although that would have been nice to know, maybe when you fell to the
centre of a planet orbiting a black hole?”

Rose shook her head. The answer to that was immediately obvious to her. “That had to happen like
that, Doctor. If you hadn’t gone down the drill shaft looking for the TARDIS, you wouldn’t have
learned the truth about the Beast. You wouldn’t have been there to destroy the urns so he couldn’t
leave the planet.”

The Doctor wanted to debate that point, but it was hard when he knew she was right. Rose smirked
at him, and he squeezed her side, making her squirm.

“At least we finally know all of Bad Wolf’s secrets,” he said once she’d stopped moving.

Instead of agreeing, Rose shifted her gaze so she was looking over his shoulder, rather than meeting
his eyes. “Rose?”

She reached for his tie and ran her fingers over the smooth silk.

The Doctor wasn’t even surprised anymore. “All right, what’s left?” he asked, with considerably
more equanimity than he would have felt if they’d had this conversation a month ago.

Her shoulders lifted and fell in a tiny shrug, but she still didn’t look up. “I don’t know,” she admitted.
“But I know there’s more coming, eventually.”

“Eventually?” He couldn’t help the squeak in his voice. It was one thing to hear there was more to
discover about Bad Wolf; it was quite another for Rose to suggest those discoveries were lurking
somewhere in their future.

Rose took a deep breath and finally looked him in the eye. “I saw everything, Doctor. All that is, all
that was, all that ever could be. I saw every possible timeline for my life, and every moment of every
timeline.”

He grasped the implications of that immediately. “Every moment of our lives. Every happy surprise,
eye heartache.”

She nodded. “So I locked the memories. I never even knew, because most of them don’t unlock as
they happen.” She wrinkled her nose. “Can you imagine having memories unlocking every day of
your life?”

“You wouldn’t be able to live your life because you’d constantly be remembering seeing it.” He
paused, his mind catching up with the conversation. “But there are some things you will remember.
Other changes or side effects of Bad Wolf that aren’t relevant to our life yet, but will be someday.”

“Something like that.”

Tension drained out of her body, and the Doctor realised she’d expected him to be upset by that
revelation, or worried at the very least. He ran his hand down her arm, letting his touch further
reassure her.

“After twelve hundred years, I really didn’t think the life of a time traveller had any more surprises
for me,” he said a moment later. “But I suppose Bad Wolf is a unique case.”

Rose fidgeted again, then turned so she was looking directly at him. “Good different, or bad
different?”
Her blonde hair diffused the warm light of the fire behind her, giving her a golden halo that vividly reminded the Doctor of his first glimpse of Bad Wolf. He combed his fingers through her hair and watched it glow in the light.

“Oh, definitely good different.”

There was a husky timbre to his voice that he didn’t bother hiding. She could tell exactly how he felt, and anyway, he’d told her how sexy Bad Wolf was months ago.

Rose tilted her head, and he waited for the question. “What makes Bad Wolf so sexy?”

The remembered sensation of the energy buzzing beneath her skin flashed through the Doctor’s mind, but he shook his head. That wasn’t the real reason.

He cupped her face in his hand and brushed his thumb over her cheek. “You opened the heart of the TARDIS because you wanted to save me,” he murmured. “All of time was coursing through you, but there was still so much tenderness in your eyes when you said you wanted me safe.”

The same tenderness shone back at him now, and the Doctor had to clear his throat before he could continue. “Bad Wolf is a reminder of how much you love me, Rose. And that’s more attractive than I can say.”

Rose turned her head and pressed her lips to the palm of his hand. “You’re my Doctor.”

The simple declaration brought the same rush of love to the Doctor’s hearts that he’d felt the first time, and every time since. Unwilling to tolerate even the few inches that separated them any longer, he wrapped his arm around her waist and tugged her towards him.

I love you, Rose, he told her as their lips met. The hand on her waist slid under her jumper, caressing the sensitive spot on her side. Rose shivered in his arms, but he tamped down his smug satisfaction. After four years, he knew how easily she could turn the tables.

He felt her lips curve into a smile, but then, to his surprise, she pulled out of the kiss.

“Rose?” Through the desire already simmering between them, he could sense her clever mind working. When the tip of her tongue appeared behind her smile, his hearts sped up.

Rose slid off his lap and held out her hand, which he took without question. She was the Wolf and he was her mate, and he would follow her wherever she would lead.

Her eyes softened when she caught that thought. Then she glanced behind her at the plush rug laid out in front of the fireplace, and the Doctor’s breath caught in anticipation.

“I think,” she said deliberately as she backed up towards the fireplace, “that we had made certain plans… for later.”

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Rose rested her head on the Doctor’s chest, listening to the dual heartbeat—significantly faster than normal, she thought with pride. A moment later, she felt the rumble of his laughter when he caught that thought, then he brushed his lips over the top of her head.

“I can feel yours racing too,” he pointed out.

The glow of the fire felt overly warm now, but Rose was too content to get up. She rolled onto her
side, and the Doctor mirrored her so they were facing each other.

He reached for her hand and laced their fingers together. “This was an excellent start to our holiday.”

His serious tone made her laugh, like she knew he had hoped. But before she could tease him about starting as they meant to go on, something tickled at her nose.

Rose held her breath and rubbed at her nose, hoping the sneeze would go away. Instead it got worse, and she sneezed rapidly four times in succession.

“Ah!” she said, sitting upright and rubbing at her nose. “This rug is tickling me,” she exclaimed.

The Doctor’s confused frown disappeared. “Ah.” His fingers sank into the deep plush fibres. “Good for romantic love-making in front of the fireplace, not so great for basking in the afterglow.”

Rose shook her head, still fighting back a sneeze. The Doctor chuckled, then stood up and offered her a hand. “Let’s go outside for a bit before it gets completely dark,” he suggested. “We can take a walk through the snow, then come inside and have dinner.”

It was dusk when they stepped outside, the hazy hour between sunset and nightfall. The snow had stopped sometime in the afternoon, and enough of the clouds had cleared to let the moon appear against the twilight blue sky.

Perhaps it was the hour, or the softness of the freshly fallen snow, but somehow, time seemed to still around them. It felt like the universe was holding its breath, waiting for something.

And in that moment of anticipation, the Doctor realised what a gift Rose had given them when she’d hidden all her knowledge of Bad Wolf. He didn’t want to know. He wanted to live it.

“It’s not only Bad Wolf,” he murmured. Rose took his hand and he squeezed it as he continued. “There are so many adventures left for us—planets to save, villains to stop, people to meet…”

She nodded. “And adventures should be lived.”

A gust of wind blew through the trees, making Rose shiver and step closer to the Doctor. He hugged her tight, letting her benefit from his elevated body temperature.

Overhead, the first few stars twinkled in the darkening sky, reminding them of their most recent adventure. “We stopped the stars from going out,” Rose whispered.

The Doctor nodded, his nose brushing against her head. “Yep.”

She rested her hands on his, and her leather gloves were soft against his skin. “Is it all over, do you think? All the stars back, the Void repaired…”

The Doctor tilted his head and considered. “I think so,” he said finally. “But it wouldn’t hurt to keep an eye on things for a while, see if there are any lingering side effects we ought to take care of.”

Rose turned and wrapped her arms around his waist. A thrill of excitement coursed through the Doctor when she smiled up at him, the yearning to explore sparkling in her eyes. He could spend centuries travelling with her and never grow weary.

“Well then,” she drawled. “I guess we know what our next adventure is.”

“Hmmmm…” The Doctor nuzzled his cold nose against hers, then pulled back and smiled down at her. “But do you know what the greatest adventure of all is, Rose?”
She looked up at him, starlight reflected in her eyes. “I think so. But tell me anyway?”

The Doctor closed his eyes and reached for the bond, pulling her into a telepathic embrace as he leaned down to kiss her. She knew exactly what he was going to say—she’d heard him think it earlier, and had immediately agreed. He told her anyway.

*Loving you will always be the greatest adventure of my life.*

Chapter End Notes

AN: Just the epilogue left!
It was well past twilight, and the few daytime sounds of Leadworth had long since faded into the soft song of the night. Amelia Pond lay in bed, listening to them all—the owl’s hoots floating in through the open window, the soft creak of the kitchen door opening, and her parents’ hushed voices as they left the house to go to a late showing at the cinema.

And…

Amelia stared at the wall opposite her bed and listened to the whispering that had become just as familiar as the creaky stair her da always forgot to skip. She’d told her parents about the voice at supper that night, but neither of them had really listened to her.

But she could hear it. A man, saying the same word over and over.

Amelia threw back the duvet and rolled out of bed, kneeling on the floor beside it. If her parents wouldn’t listen, she needed to talk to someone who would. She rested her clasped hands on the bed and closed her eyes.

A moment later, she opened them again. She was just a kid. Why would anyone listen to her?

Maybe… Grownups always liked it when you started by thanking them for something.

She took a deep breath and clenched her hands tightly. “Dear Santa. Thank you for the dolls and pencils and the fish.” Confidence regained, she continued. “It’s Easter now, so… I hope I didn’t wake you, but honest, it is an emergency.”

The man’s voice whispered through the room again, and Amelia’s eyes flew open. He sounded… scared.

She swallowed hard. “There’s… there’s someone in my wall. Trapped. My da says that’s impossible, but I know it’s not, because I hear him talking.”

The man’s whispers grew fainter, and Amelia’s heart thudded. Somehow, she just knew that his time was running out.

“So, please, please, could you send someone to help him?” she begged. “Or a policeman. Or a”—

A strange grinding noise interrupted her prayer. Amelia tried to focus, but the grinding sound was almost immediately followed by a loud thud. She sighed and shook her head.

“Back in a moment,” she promised Santa. Then she jumped to her feet and picked up the torch she kept by her bed, so she could see what was happening in the garden.

Her eyes widened when she pushed aside the lace curtain covering the window and peered outside. A tall, blue box was standing next to their garden shed. The light on top winked at her, but most reassuring were the words she could read above the windows.

“Police Box,” she whispered.

Amelia exhaled and looked up at the ceiling. “Thank you, Santa.”
Chapter End Notes

At this point, you need to set aside every idea you have about how canon episodes will work in this series. I'm obviously rearranging stories, putting Eleventh Hour ahead of the specials in the next story. And equally obvious, it's not going to be exactly... or even that much... like the canon story. I posted on tumblr (chocolatequeennk) that we are beyond the canon limits. Thank you for reading with me this far, and I hope you enjoy where the series takes us.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!