For together you have been the sun

by HellNHighHeels

Summary

River shuts her eyes, remembering what they're fighting for and how far they've come. Resolve settles in her veins, and she knows that if they want their happy ending, they'll have to go just a little bit further.

Notes

Hello! You read correctly. This is a sequel to And the rest is rust and stardust. Having read it is not technically a prerequisite; however, there will be allusions to it, as it takes place in the same universe.

Story title from a poem I found on pinterest

And many thanks to Cassie for her editing skills and her endless ability to tolerate me. Without her I would surely wither away into nothing and perish.
The sound of shrieking and gunshots pierce the air, echoing in a sick cacophony around the small, dingy room she's come to think of as a second home. Its nothing out of the ordinary, if she's honest. But when a hideous clump of green, acidic slime splatters a bit too close for comfort, River is left with no choice but to shout, "Get your head out of your arse and shoot something, Harkness!"

"Anyone ever tell you you'll catch more flies with honey?" he teases, a grin in his voice as he snipes off the most likely culprit of the slime now burning a hole in her keyboard.

River shoots him a glare that's melted the flesh off lesser men. "You're about to catch my foot up your backside if you don't get a handle on this!"

"Promises, promises, Professor!" Jack sing-songs, stepping firmly between her and their attackers. He's quick with a trigger, and it's easy enough to slow down the creatures lumbering in through the small door. It's the glass she's worried about. Any minute now they'll break through, and if that happens, even Jack's excellent aim won't be enough to hold them back. Right now, their only hope is four hundred thousand kilometers away.

"When you get into the mainframe," River shouts orders into the pixilated monitor, “make sure you set the return coordinates before you fry the system or you won't be able to get back."

It's hard to make out which team member is on the other end of the line, the poor reception causing the picture quality to reduce their faces to nothing more than a blur of worry and confusion. They're shouting something, some worry or complaint, but between the erratic gunfire and the hissing of static, she can't make out a word.

"Just get to the center of the hive!" River instructs. "Never mind the drones. They'll be useless without their queen."

"I know the feeling," Jack quips beside her. But the voice on the other end of the line is drowned out by the sound of inhuman screeching. An explosion ripples through the speakers of the com-device, followed by more frenzied gunfire and a few broken words before the crackle of static crescendos and the connection is lost.

"Do you copy?" River tries again, the edges of her voice fringed with panic. "Hello? Are you
reading me?"

The line continues to relay only static, and River fights the urge to throw the useless device across the room.

"Dammit!" she exclaims. Out of luck and out of options, River finds herself thinking: 'what would the Doctor do?'

Eyes gravitating to her bag and the vortex manipulator she keeps there at all times, River knows exactly what that courageous, idiotic martyr of a man would do. And when he's not in the room, that means it's up to her. She should be the one up there. She has the most experience, and if she could get to the center of the hive, she's certain she could end this. Besides, surely just one little trip into space wouldn't hurt. Mind made up, River reaches for her vortex manipulator, all determination and defiance when-

"Whoa, whoa!" A masculine hand closes around her wrist, stopping her. "What are you doing? You can't risk going up there."

"It should be me, Jack. I know how to work the system. I can-"

"It's too dangerous," he argues, caring eyes breaking away from his target to pin her in place, reason overriding her impulsive nature.

River wants to argue that that's exactly why she should be the one up there, that she's been saving the world longer than these children have been out of nappies. But there's a small voice in the back of her mind that she can't seem to shake. It's small, and it's stern, and it sounds exactly like him when it reminds her that the stakes are just too high. She hates being the one on the ground. It makes her feel helpless and trapped, choking on the very air in her lungs.

"Have a little faith," her friend encourages, and River grinds her teeth in protest, biting back every instinct she has as she drops the vortex manipulator. She reaches for her gun instead, unleashing her pent up frustrations in the form of a furious hail of gunfire. Her efforts put a new hole in a few alien faces, but it's not enough to keep the creatures at bay. Bullets have barely even slowed these zombie drones down, and if the team doesn't do something fast, they'll just keep coming and coming, and they won't ever stop.

River's eyes scan the room for a way out. They'd never make it to the stairs, and the lift is too slow to be of use. The enemy is closing in on all sides, and here they are, pinned to the controls, their backs to the wall. Jack knows they're in trouble too, because when his eyes flash over to hers, there's a twinkle in them that she knows all too well.

"Don't you dare," she orders.

But it's too late because Jack is already stepping into the fray, drawing the alien's attention. They lunge for him like he's prime rib at a free buffet. River swears that if she had a penny for every immortal idiot she had to watch be the hero, she'd have enough money to buy a planet just for her shoes.

One of the younger creatures leaps onto Jack's back, tackling him to the ground. It's slimy jaws are open, ready to clamp around her friend's throat and put an end to that handsome face of his when River puts a bullet between its eyes. Unfortunately the action ensues the wrath of a few of it's uglier friends, as three pupilless eyes train their attentions in her direction. She's busy unloading half a clip into them when a sudden ear-piercing shriek fills the air. In unison, the creatures drop to the floor, lifeless.
The silence that follows is deafening. She and Jack's eyes are both fixed on the teleport, River's breath caught somewhere between her lungs and her chest.

Two seconds pass.

Then three.

And four, before finally-

The air crackles to life as three figures appear in the empty space before them.

Owen, Gwen, and Ianto step off the platform, and River lets out a sigh of relief, turning her gaze on Jack. "What are you playing at, Harkness?"

He dusts himself off, shrugging as he gets to his feet. "I was catching flies."

The grin he's wearing is so insufferable River has half a mind to shoot him. She might just, if she thought it'd do any good.

"You didn't tell us they'd keep re-spawning," Owen complains, sifting his way through what was once their pastry table. One of the goodies must have survived, because his eyes light up as he scoops up a donut and dusts it off.

"Well, some things have to be a surprise. Otherwise, you'd get bored and retire. Where would we be without your wit and charm?"

"Speaking of retiring, aren't you getting a little... round for this?"

River's eyes narrow. "I could say the same about you." A brow arches as her gaze slips to the half-eaten donut in his hand. Owen frowns, contemplative eyes falling to his snack. River must have hit a nerve because in the next moment, he drops it and spits what was in his mouth in the trash. River smirks, smug as she tucks away her weapon and dusts off her hands.

"Next time," Ianto chimes in, "I want to be the one to hack the system while Gwen lays down cover fire. She nearly hit the wrong button and turned us into confetti."

"It had to be me, you numpty. Only the queen or another female can fly the ship. But next time, sure, you can decipher the alien language while I twiddle my thumbs."

"Wouldn't count on it, dear." River smiles. "I gave you the hard job because, well, when it comes to saving the world,"-a explanation escapes her lips in the form of a burdened, but altogether chuffed sigh- "women do it better."

River offers the girl a conspiratory wink, her statement only furthered when Jack adds, "No arguments here." Toeing at one of the drone corpses, he continues, "What should we do with these fellas?"
"They're braindead without their host queen," River informs him. "Put them on ice downstairs. In a century or so a new queen will spawn, and they'll reanimate. You might get some information out of them then."

Jack nods in agreeance. "You heard the lady, Owen. Get to dragging."

"What?" he stutters. "By myself?"

"Gwen has to go, Ianto's pretty, River's got a bun in the oven, and I'm the boss, so, yeah. Go work off those donuts." Jack grins, delighting in Owen's tormented grumble.

River shakes her head, amused. It's then her eyes catch sight of the time. It's getting late, and the absence of an alien invasion has brought the aching of her muscles to the forefront of her mind. "I'll walk out with you, Gwen," River announces, and the girl pauses, waiting for River to join her on the lift. "My bus will be here soon, and you know what him indoors is like when I'm late for tea."

"I'm happy to drive you," Gwen offers as River comes to stand with her on the small circle.

"Yeah, Song," Jack adds. "I'd happily take you home."

River snorts. "Thank you, Gwen, but I'll manage. As for you,"-River pushes the button to activate the lift. It roars to life with a groan, and River smirks down at him as they make their ascent-"I'm not sure I want you knowing where I live, Harkness."

A chuckle rolls out from behind that devilish smile as he shouts back, "I think you're just scared you wouldn't want me to leave."

"Oh, you'd leave." They're almost to the top now, and the grin River flashes down at him is just the friendly side of feral. "Maybe not in one piece, but you'd leave."

Jack's sparkling grin is the last thing she sees of the building before the lift reaches the surface. The perception field feels fuzzy on her skin as she takes in the outside world, calm, collected, and totally unaware that they were on the brink of enslavement only a moment ago. The streets are practically empty. No cars or pedestrians, just the hum of street lights and the occasional gust of wind.

"I'd tell you to be careful, Professor, but…" Gwen breaks the stillness, her playful voice fading into nothing but a knowing smirk.

River's answering chuckle is warm and wicked. "I'd never forgive you if you did. Now get home to that husband of yours."

Gwen casts her eyes briefly downward, a subconscious show of empathy or misplaced guilt, before looking back with a smile River almost believes. "You sure about that ride?"

"Maybe next time," River lies. "It's a lovely night for a walk, don't you think?"

Gwen forces another smile, nodding farewell as she turns to leave. River watches the other woman go, a dull ache stirring in her chest as she finds herself alone. It's almost pleasant, like that weightless feeling one gets right before they fall. Inhaling deep, River takes the plunge back into reality, stepping past the filter and into the Cardiff night air.

She hadn't been lying before. It really is a lovely night for a walk, and so she takes the long way to her bus stop, carrying along the seafront instead. Her gaze gravitates upwards to the night sky and all the stars she can't see through the light pollution. She misses them more than she likes to admit.
"It's got to have stars, River!" the Doctor exclaims, bouncing from one display to the other. "Oh! And a rocket ship!"

Her ridiculous husband scoops up a nightlight shaped like a rocket ship and begins flying it around the store, providing his own sound effects as he does so. River is left with no choice but to shake her head, too amused and smitten to argue. One could say she was becoming a bit of a softy, but thus far, no one has said it and lived to tell the tale. On her left, her husband is tossing all manner of squeaky toys and colorful rattles in the cart.

Meanwhile, River carefully and meticulously decides between a green frog onesie or a yellow duck onesie. She's always loved green, and come to think of it, a frog-like alien did cover her favorite handbag in mucus. Lips pursing, River's eyes drift over to the yellow onesie. She can't recall ever being assaulted by any sort of fowl, and the speckles of blue do remind her of duck ponds. Naturally, she proclaims the ducks the winner, laying it in the trolley and placing the frogs back on the shelf. When she looks up, the floppy-haired buffoon she foolishly decided to breed with is finally still. Somewhat alarmed, River makes her way to stand by his side.

"Did you finally short-circuit, dear?" she quips in a lovingly patronizing tone. In return, the Doctor simply smiles.

"I found it," he whispers, not taking his eyes off the cot in front of him.

River's gaze follows his to a plastic mobile with sparkling silver stars and ringed planets. "Just like yours," she hums, something warm blossoming inside her chest.

He takes her hand in his as they stand over it, the whole universe centering around a child's plaything. "And yours."

She's about five minutes late when she finally reaches her stop. It proves to be no matter because the bus is waiting for her. When Glyn looks up from his paper and sees her coming, he opens the doors with a delighted smile.

"What kept you late this evening, Mrs. Song?"

Stepping on the bus and making her way to her usual seat, River sighs and explains, "A colony of slime-secreting, brain-dead aliens tried to eat me."

"Say no more," Glyn chuckles, shutting the doors. "I've worked in public service for forty years. I've fought off plenty of brain-dead aliens in my day."

"You know," Glyn jests, eyeing her in the rearview mirror, "if you get any bigger, I'll have to start charging you fair for two."

River laughs, bypassing the fact that he hasn't charged her fair in months. "If he gets any bigger, I'll
start charging him rent."

The bus starts with a jolt, engine roaring to life as Glyn pulls out onto the deserted road. There was a
time she wouldn't have been caught dead on public transport unless she was stealing it. Truth be told,
she'll always be the type of girl who prefers star-hoppers to quaint Sunday drives. She'll always itch
for cheap thrills and daring escapes. The life she had before will always be in her bones, always hum
inside of her like a favorite song she used to play on repeat.

And yet here she is now: no time travel, no vortex manipulator, no wine. It's enough to try any girl.
At least she still has her guns. There were plenty of things she was prepared to do for this pregnancy.
Things like give up sushi, heat lunch meat to exactly 74 degrees C, and limit herself to only 200mg
of caffeine a day.

However, at the top of the list of things she wasn't willing to do was let alien dictators overthrow the
planet.

Outside, a motorbike can be heard as it zooms past the bulky bus and River tries not to think about
all the other things she's given up. Just a little longer now and it'll all be worth it. River's gaze drifts
absentmindedly to the window. Between the flashes of streetlights, she can see her reflection in the
dark windows, all round and glowing. Tender and loving hands rest over her belly, stroking the
precious cargo she carries inside.

Maybe she has gone soft, after all.

A heavy sigh that feels more wistful than content drags out of her nose. Between the darkness and
low purr of the engine, it's easy to be pulled back to the beginning, back to when it all went wrong.

"What sort of prophecy could scare you two?"

There's a hint of comic disbelief in Jim's voice. But the Doctor is grave as he responds, "The kind
confirmed by the The Sisterhood of Karn.

Jim instantly sober, clearing his throat. "And here I thought you two were here to ask me to be the
Godfather."

"We wish it were that simple," her husband offers cautiously. "But this isn't something we can
ignore. They will come after us. It's only a matter of time."

Time, their plaything, their ally, had turned against them. She's not even showing yet, and the
universe was already plotting how best to steal the thing she loved most in this world. The news
barely had time to settle in before it all came crashing down. They haven't even picked out colors,
and yet they're donning themselves with war paint.

"I don't understand," Jim rebuts. "He's not even born yet. Babies... Babies aren't-

"Dangerous?" River cuts in, her very existence all evidence to the contrary.

Letting out a long, dejected breath, Jim offers himself to them. "How can I help?"

"We need transportation," the Doctor states, and Jim frowns.

"Can't you use the TARDIS?"
"They might be able to find us through that. We're going to have to lay low for a while, just until the baby is born. If he's what they say he is, we'll figure out what to do from there."

"If they can track the TARDIS, can't they track you?"

At Jim's query, The Doctor's silver tongue falls silent. River feels it in the air, the twisting of the delicate thread from which his hope dangles.

It's then that River knows what has to be done, what they'll have to do if they truly want a way out. "Not if we eliminate what they're searching for."

"River," the Doctor gasps, hurt and appalled, looking at her as if she'd slapped him. Reflexively, River puts a protective hand over her stomach.

"Not like that, Doctor. But if we..."

He reads her thoughts in a way no one else can, because his hand tightens around hers before she even finishes the thought. "I'm not going to do that to you again."

"Actually," she lets out a shaky sigh, the words burning her throat, "I had something else in mind."

She'll never forget the look of confusion frowning his features, how it was eclipsed by dawning realization, how sorrow swelled inside those hazel eyes, and the furrow in his brows softened in a way that still makes her hearts ache.

A bump in the road shakes her out of her nightmares and back into the present, back to a warm bus and a friendly driver. Her mind always did like to drift to dark places, but when she feels the vehicle slow, she finds the strength to banish the thoughts completely. Her sweetie is just around the corner, and the sight of him is always enough to cure any ailments she may have, lower back pain not withstanding.

Cardiff wasn't her first choice to settle down, but the rift energy makes for an easy way to not only mask her genetic signature, but overshadow any residuals the TARDIS might produce as well. In all honesty, it isn't so bad. The job grants her a much-needed dose of excitement. The locals are nice enough. Of course, she's had better weather, but luckily, a youth spent in Leadworth taught her all the best ways to cope with quaint towns and dreary forecasts.

The night air on her face is brisk, the walk home always a little longer than it needs to be. The next street over gets her home a few minutes faster, but she's always much preferred the view of this one. The trees that line the street are strung with fairy lights, and there's one little shop she always likes to glimpse before she carries on home.

Up ahead, a whistle, far too chipper for such an hour, can be heard. River slows her pace to listen. It's coming from the little shop she adores, the one that's always the last on the street to lock its doors. She had worried her tardiness would make her miss this part of her nightly routine, but as she grows closer, she notices the door is still propped open. Leaning against one of the nearby trees, River can just barely make out the figure inside. She watches the doorway, a small smile threatening to tug her cheeks as the owner steps out onto the street to gather his signs.

She can't hear exactly what he's saying, but he's talking to himself, floppy brown hair falling into his
eyes all the while. There's a jam stain on his shirt, and his bow tie is crooked, and every ounce of her being aches to tell him so. The word hello bubbles and burns in the back of her throat, begging her to let it escape.

But she doesn't.

She knows that when he goes inside and closes the door, she'll fight the urge to run across the road and bang on the obstacle between them until he swings it open. She'll want nothing more than to fist her fingers in his hair and kiss his ridiculous face until they both forget how to breathe.

But she won't.

Instead, she watches silently as he nearly trips on the step on his way back inside. River bites back a laugh, lest he hear her. She wasn't allowed to interfere, but a little observation never hurt. Well, that wasn't strictly true. Seeing him always hurt a little. Nostalgia was an addictive little ache, but she allows herself the indulgence because a glimpse was better than nothing at all. It isn't much, but thus far, it has been enough to sustain her these past six months.

Eventually, her clumsy husband disappears behind the wooden door, and River watches through the small windows as the light goes out. Even in this altered state, she still knows him so well that she can count down the seconds between the first floor light extinguishing and when the second floor bursts to life. Right on cue, his silhouette can be seen stepping into the room. The curtains sway softly to the tune of the night breeze, and his shadow grows larger as he makes his way to the window.

Her sweetie pulls them open with a flourish that makes a smitten smile tug at her cheeks. He lingers at the window a while, gazing up at the night sky like he's looking for something that just isn't there. River's eyes study the way his chest expands and then collapses as he lets out a deep breath, remembering all the times that very same movement has stirred her curls or ghosted across her skin. When her gaze drifts back to his face, she discovers that he's no longer watching the stars. His attentions have turned to the dull and empty streets, and River ducks behind the tree, oxygen stalling in her lungs as she hides from view.

*He's been running around like a madman, frenzied, but focused. When he finally emerges from beneath the console, his arms are full of tools and wires and some type of helmet. The top step nearly claims him, but somehow he manages to catch himself before he sends the equipment clattering across the metal floor.*

River sits in the jump seat, watching, waiting despite how every atom in her body vibrates to move, to work, to do anything but think. The Doctor refused to let her lift a thing, and on a normal day, she would have laughed in his face and done whatever she liked in spite of his protests, the way she always does.

*But this time was different. He needed this, needed a task to keep his hands busy and his head away from what he was about to do. And so she let him fuss over her. She gave him this because they both knew it would be the last time he could. It was his last chance to take care of her for the next nine months.*

*His movements are a flurry of manic plugging and twisting and tweaking until suddenly, he stills, turning slowly to look at her like she's the only creature in the universe. Behind him stands a foreboding mass of wires and tubes and River can't help but think that the machine that's supposed to save them looks more like a monster than a miracle.*
He takes a step toward her, and River leaps to her feet, pulled to him like dust into a collapsing star. He bends around her like a wave around a stone, and River lets herself drown in him, in how he smells of time and tea, in how his arms are the closest thing to a home she's ever known. She drowns, because soon she'll have to live without.

Time is of the essence, but he always finds a few spare moments to give to her, a precious few seconds off which she can live and keep close to her hearts in the cold nights ahead. He doesn't speak, but his kiss is worth a thousand words. It's sweeter than any fond farewell. More meaningful than any poetic declaration of love. She wraps herself around him, holding tight to ward off the knowledge that this is the last time she'll taste him for months, that the comfort of his embrace won't be waiting for her every single day. His arms around her are more solid than the ground at her feet, and for a moment, she wonders if her knees will hold her when he lets her go.

But then she remembers who she is. She has to stand her ground, has to be strong, because if she doesn't, there will be no one to bring him back. Even so, he's the one to break the kiss, pulling back enough to gaze into her eyes. His cheeks are wet, and her fingers coil around his forearms to keep him from slipping away.

A calloused thumb strokes over the apple of her cheeks, the corner of his mouth twitching upwards in a sad smile as they both pretend not to notice the tears.

"I have to do this," he sates, voice so fragile it sounds more like a question.

The hands cradling her face give her strength enough to nod, her nails biting into his skin just a little harder as she says, "I know."

It has to be him this time, she knows. It makes sense for her to be the one to stay behind. They learned a long time ago that she was far more formidable with her memories intact. Being a trained assassin did have its perks occasionally, and should things go wrong, they'd need all the protection they could get.

The Doctor presses his forehead to hers, his eyes clenched shut. She wishes they were open, wishes she could get one last look into that swirling pool of hazel. There's a piece of her, a dark, selfish side she likes to keep hidden, that burns with protest. It aches, and it screams that this isn't fair, that they've paid their dues. After all they've done, everything they've fought against and all the things they've fought to protect, the universe owes them a fate better than this one. But life is hardly ever fair.

River shuts her eyes, remembering what they're fighting for and how far they've come. Resolve settles in her veins, and she knows that if they want their happy ending, they'll have to go just a little bit further. She's rooted in place when his fingers finally slip from her face, taking her breath and a piece of her hearts with him as he grabs the fob watch and steps back and into position. "I'll come back to you," he promises.

A laugh that feels more like a sob escapes her lips as she demands, "You better."

After a moment, River peaks back around from behind her shelter to find his curtains are closed, the windows locked. And when the bedroom light goes off, plunging the building into darkness, her husband feels a million miles away again.

Hearts somewhere in her throat and their child nestled safely in her belly, River lets out a long sigh. There's nothing left to keep her company except softly twinkling fairy lights, nothing around to see
or hear her but the night wind, and yet River can't help but whisper, "Goodnight, sweetie."
Almost ordinary

Chapter Summary

In all honesty, he isn't all that different. He still wears ridiculous clothes and smiles at pretty girls and trips over his own feet. Overall, it's business as usual. The only true difference just happens to be the one that matters most. She does her best to remind herself it's only temporary. It's not like he's gone, not really, not forever.

"She finds this objectivity of hers, this clarity, almost more depressing than she can bear, not because there is anything hideous or repellent about this man, but because he has now returned to the ordinary level, the level of things she can see, in all their amazing and complex particularity, but cannot touch." -Margaret Atwood

She's well and truly late for tea by the time she makes it up the stairs to her flat. More out of breath than she'd like to admit, River swears the third floor gets further away every day. As she continues to trudge her way up the steps, she begins to question the love affair she's always had with heights. The view just doesn't seem worth it when she's forced to manually waddle her way up three flights of stairs with a bowling ball under her dress. Her back aches, and her calves are throbbing, and she's never missed her vortex manipulator more.

There is a lift, mind, but she refuses to use it on account of rampant stubbornness and a mild phobia of small spaces. The only time River utilizes it is when she's bringing home her weekly shopping. And even then, she simply shoves her groceries in and then waits to call the lift until she's made it to the top.

The building and its inhabitants are relatively quiet. She researched them all before moving in, obviously. They're a younger crowd who work nights and don't seem to notice or mind the way she comes and goes at all hours. They keep to themselves, and so far, she hasn't heard any complaints about her current housemate, which is more than River can say for herself.

As she approaches her front door, she can hear the subject in question wreaking havoc on her kitchen. Honestly, he could make a fuss fluffing a pillow. River rifles through her bag for her keys, mentally preparing herself before opening the door. Luckily for her, it takes a moment to get inside. Old habits die hard, and she took it upon herself to set up a few extra security measures. Twenty-first century deadlocks were far too easy to pick for her liking. Most of the precautions are harmless alarms, sensory deterrents, and extraterrestrial scanners. But her favorite is the door handle. She coated it with a fine layer of nanobots that act as a fingerprint scanner. If anyone but herself attempts to turn it, the metal will heat up enough to melt the scales right off a dragon. The only security precaution she didn't take was hanging a clove of garlic and some rosary beads.

Some might say she was overdoing it, but it's only paranoia if no one is after you.
When the alarms disengage, River steps inside to the tune of something shattering in the next room. With a sigh, she shouts, "Everything alright in there?"

"No, ma'am, everything is not alright!" an almost human voice fusses. "You are late."

Hanging up her coat, River fights the urge to huff like a scolded child. Over two hundred years old and it's the first time she's ever even vaguely attempted to adhere to a curfew. It's hardly her fault that pesky planet-conquering aliens pay little mind to her dinner plans.

Making her way to the kitchen, River spares a glance to the baby’s room, or rather, what will be her son's room. At the moment, it's cluttered with boxes of toys that have never been taken out of their packing. The walls are still as dull and white as the day she moved in. The cot is the only thing put together, perfectly assembled and tucked away in the corner, dust collecting on a mattress and mobile that have yet to see the light of day.

One hand on her stomach, River tells herself that there's still time. One day soon she'll pick out colors and fill a mahogany dresser with tiny, colorful clothing. She'll hang photos and put up curtains and line every surface with snugly toys. The very thought makes her hearts both flutter and flinch, her insides a mess of thrilled and terrified and nervous and excited, all for the one adventure she's never had. The only trouble is, nothing seems to be going to plan. This isn't the room she imagined she'd be decorating. And when they bought all the embellishments, she never once considered she'd be displaying them alone.

In the next room, the clatter of cutlery on plates can be heard, and River gladly permits herself the distraction. When she turns the corner for the kitchen, she finds her pint-sized, robotic companion is setting the table. It stands just over a meter in height, a pair of oversized binoculars balancing over a rectangular base. Two arm-like appendages protrude from its midsection, but in all honesty, they're wasted as limbs because they'd serve far more successfully as weapons of mass destruction.

To further her hypothesis, the droid's stiff body pivots, its graceless metal appendage knocking over an empty glass. River shakes her head, wondering if the clumsy thing would be more productive as a glorified coatchark than as a housekeeper. She only came by him a few years ago while on a mission to liberate a few artifacts from a starship. The droid was stowed away with the rubbish. It was the Doctor who found him one boring Tuesday afternoon, and since that man never met a machine from which he could resist tinkering, he took it upon himself to repair the out-of-service droid. It stayed on the TARDIS for years, sweeping and mopping up the ship's endless rooms because they never had much of a use for him until now.

River would argue that useful was a debatable description. He's a bit outdated, bless him. Despite being a twenty-fourth century drone, he still manages to look like a scrapyard reject from a low-budget 1980s movie. He's clunky and slow, and his wiring is a bit buggered. Though she supposes the latter isn't entirely his fault. He was a result of the Doctor's handiwork, after all.

She watches from the doorway as the machine in question reverses with a bit too much enthusiasm, its tank-like treads crashing into a cabinet and nearly knocking a vase onto the floor. As she watches the small machine maneuver it's way around the small space, she can't help but think that, like it's creator, it's possible the machine brings more mayhem than it does assistance. But River has always enjoyed a bit of chaos in her life, thrived on it, even. If nothing else, having the droid around certainly helped to keep things interesting. Or maybe she simply has a soft spot for quirky, broken things.

"Evening, Ethan,” River greets with a smile that's almost genuine. His proper name is something along the lines of a make 7000 second class Essential Task Helper Android or some other series of fancy titles and futuristic lingo designed to sound impressive. But it was a bit of a mouthful, so River
shortened it, somewhat affectionately, naming the small droid Ethan.

"Do not 'evening' me," the machine scolds, and for a creature without any discernible mouth, it never fails to produce an impressive amount of sass. "And do not assume I am unaware as to where you have been. You should refrain from walking by there at night. What if he saw you?"

"He won't," River scoffs. "Honestly, it's like having a wife but without all the fun bits."

"If you are referring to coitus, I have fully-functioning body parts and am programmed to--"

"No," River interjects before it gives her a mental image she'll never purge from behind her eyes. "That's quite alright. You're not my type. I like my metal men a little taller, thank you."

An involuntary shudder rids her of the unpleasant imagery as River turns her back on Ethan in favor of attending the plants that line her kitchen windowsill. What was once a beautiful pot of Jasmine now more closely resembles a decaying cemetery weed. Try as she might, a green thumb is something she did not possess. As much as she loved digging in the dirt, it really wasn't worth it if there was nothing ancient or shiny to be found.

Drooping and wilted, she's certain the flower is beyond saving. She waters it anyway, trying her best not to see it as an omen. If she couldn't even keep something that relies on photosynthesis alive, how was she going to manage an actual living creature? Though, to her credit, her track record with caregiving wasn't entirely bleak. She did successfully care for a pet once, however briefly, when she lived in Leadworth.

"You can't just steal things whenever you fancy it." Even as he protests, Rory helps her load the crate into the boot of his tiny car. The vehicle dips under the pressure, and Mels rests her hands on her hips, satisfied.

"I prefer to think of it as liberating," she sing-songs, her chin held high. "And it's not a thing. It's a defenseless animal."

Confounded eyes nearly bug out of his skull, throwing his arms out in frustration as he squeals, "It's an eight-foot python!"

"Exactly. One of nature’s best predators and it's being kept in a three-foot box. It's not right."

"Mels--" Rory starts, only to be silenced by the slamming of the car boot.

"His owner" --and if Mels spits the word a bit too harshly, Rory doesn't take notice--"wasn't treating him right. The poor thing has spent his whole life in this tiny little cage. All that potential beaten down and shoved into a box, it's spirit broken. And when it looked at me, it was so pitiful I just..." Mels lets out a shaky breath, taming the fire in her eyes as she confesses, "I have to, Rory. Are you with me or not?"

The scrawny boy across from her gives a relenting sigh, just like she knew he would. She can always count on him, her friend and father. "What's the plan, exactly?" Rory gulps, eyeing the reptile stowed away in the boot of his car, voice waveriing a bit as he contemplates being trapped in a vehicle with an animal that could swallow him whole. "Drive it back to Asia?"

"Don't be daft," Mels quips, a smirk tugging at the corner of her mouth. "Your car would never make it that far. The woods will do just fine."
"What if it mates and we get an infestation?"

"Not gonna happen," she answers dismissively. "They're not native to the U.K. You can't reproduce if you're the only one of your kind."

Rory's endless capacity to care shines out through his eyes, his face the picture of melancholy concern. "So it'll just be all alone in the wild?"

Mels simply shrugs, washing his troubled expression away as she quietly confesses, "Better to be all alone than in a cage."

"Fine," her partner in crime huffs, tossing her the keys.

"You want me to drive?" Mels asks, wide-eyed and incredulous. "Not that I'm complaining."

"Yup." Rory makes for the passenger side door, opening it. "Because if we get pulled over, I'm telling them I'm your hostage. Amy can't afford to bail us both out of jail."

Another clatter of plates tells her dinner is served. When River turns back to the table, she finds yet another curious concoction of food. A steaming pile of spinach sits next to what she can only assume is homemade oatmeal. It's defying the laws of nature, somehow managing to be both soupy and lumpy at the same time. However, it doesn't turn her stomach nearly as much as the suspiciously yellow serving of low-fat yogurt.

"How very... moist," River offers, resisting the urge to breathe through her nose lest the unique concoction of smells have their way with her gag reflex.

Ethan gives a whir that sounds an awful lot like pride as he explains, "The cuisine adheres to all dietary restrictions, while simultaneously providing the nutrients required for optimal fetal development."

"And what's for afters, a lettuce cocktail?"

"Negative. For dessert, I have prepared a celery and beetroot milkshake."

"Lovely," River deadpans, taking her usual seat at the table. Ethan parks across from her, his unblinking opticals trained on her as River surveys the food before her. The spinach looks the least alarming, so she makes her start there. Scooping a respectable amount onto her spoon, River takes her life into her own hands and dares to try her first bite. It's warm on her tongue and slimier than any sort of leaf ought to be, but with a dash of pepper, it just might be edible.

Swallowing around the questionable substance, River forces a smile. "Delicious."

Ethan buzzes at the praise, recognizing his cue to clean the kitchen. He tries, bless him, and considering he has no former culinary skills or tastebuds to speak of, he does alright. River can't help but wonder if perhaps the Doctor was partially to blame for Ethan's unorthodox choices. Her husband's food preferences have always been a little left of center.

Alone once more, River reaches for the newspaper and loses herself to her nightly crossword puzzle. Dinner, dessert, and her nightly rituals come as uneventfully as they always do, and by the time River climbs into bed, her weary bones sing praises at the feel of her soft, cotton sheets. The mattress is far too big for just her, and it makes sleeping alone all the more noticeable. At least in Stormcage, her creaky cot left no room for delusions of snuggling. Not that her husband didn't try.
The loose spring is digging into her back, and his elbow is on her hair, and his chin is taking up most of the pillow, and his knee is pressed up against a body part that would make his younger self blush. They're all wrapped up in one another, and when he finally settles, a sweet stillness washes over her dingy prison cell. Rain on the windows and his breath on her cheek the only lullaby Melody Pond has ever known.

It took some time for her to learn to sleep alone again. As alone as one could be, anyway, with a parasitic bundle of joy growing inside her. A nest of pillows helps to make the elusive mistress called sleep more attainable. River wraps her limbs around an oversized pillow, both to battle discomfort and to sate a need to cuddle, to which she'll never admit.

The feather-filled sack isn't nearly lanky or wiry enough, but she makes do, her eyes settling on her bedside table and the framed photo that rests upon it like a crown. It's the first picture they took together after. It's the starting mark of something new, of a life together without spoilers and secrets and little white lies. It's a memory, the first one they framed in their newfound linear life together.

"What on Earth are you doing?" River asks, a bewildered smile curling her lips.

"It's called a selfie!" he exclaims, holding the camera out in front of him. "Or at least it ought to be." A frown steals over his pouty lips as he taps at the screen. "I think it might be busted."

River bites back a smile, making her way over to him. "That much I'm aware of, dear," she offers, patiently extracting the camera from his hands and turning it the right way around before passing it back. "Why are you taking one?"

"Because," he enunciates the word with a swirl, turning those excitable eyes on her, "we're going to take one."

"Oh, we are, are we?" River arches a brow as he bounces on the balls of his feet, bopping her nose.

"Yep. You're an excellent decorator, Professor Song. But the one thing your house lacks is pictures of your husband. Now, pretend you enjoy my company, because I intend to have this framed."

With a half-hearted sigh and a besotted smirk, River allows herself to be tugged into his side. Holding the camera out at arm's length, he instructs, "Smile in three, two–"

At the last moment, River turns, pressing a smacking kiss to his cheek and makes the Doctor's eyes go wide.

It's ridiculous and out of focus, but it puts a smile on her face and a blossoming warmth in her chest. Nevertheless, the feeling isn't quite enough of a fix for her liking, so River reaches for the top drawer of her bedside table, where she keeps all her most secret and favorite possessions. Fingers close around worn leather and she pulls her diary to her, sinking back into warm bedsheets. She flips to a page at random, eyes scanning the parchment. It's smudged and dirty, and her gaze catches on words like explosion and battlefield and for heavens sake, sweetie, not that button!
It's an adventure she remembers well, but it's no bedtime story, so she lets the pages flip as they may. When they fall open again, it reveals tear-stained ink and the drawing of a skyline she'd rather not remember. Closing the cover and brushing past those melancholy days, River strokes her fingertips along the worn, blue leather, choosing instead to linger on memories that came later, the ones that never made it into her little blue book. She never knew a full diary was a blessing in disguise, that it would give way to days that didn't come with citations and flow charts, that it would mean her memories were more than cliff notes in a grander scheme, that they were finally for her and her alone.

It's funny how the small moments have come to be her favorites. River stretches, her toes flexing beneath the covers and–

"Will you be still, woman?" he fusses, exasperated.

"I'm sorry!" River gripes. "It tickles!"

"Well when your toes are a mess, don't point any fingers at me. All I'm saying."

"Yes, sweetie," River deadpans. "Your immaculate pedicure skills are not to be questioned."

"Good," he nods, adamant. "Glad we're on the same page."

River rolls her eyes fondly, because it is good. It's more than good. It's suspiciously perfect. It's everything that quiet voice inside of her has always wanted. It's everything she never thought they'd have.

They have time enough to be still, to savor moments just because. Not to say they never fight, because, oh, do they. But when they do, they don't part fearing it will be the last words they ever say. When she storms out of a room, he knows exactly where to find her. No more guessing games. No more decades without speaking.

Finally, all lined up like days on a calendar, the edges of two separate puzzles finally smooth enough to become one. It's a Tuesday or a Sunday or a Friday afternoon, and for the first time, it doesn't really matter. Gone is the burden of spoilers, of time limitations, of restraints.

They're curled up on the settee, her feet in his lap as she tries desperately not to wiggle her toes. His bottom lip is pulled between his teeth, concentrating as if he were defusing a bomb, rather than painting her toes a particularly hideous shade of mustard yellow. It feels almost, dare she say it, normal, as normal as either of them could ever bear in any case.

"If you're done procrastinating, I do believe it was your turn, wife."

River takes in a deep breath, contemplating. After a moment, an idea comes to mind and—oh! "I spent a short time in jail with De Sade and ultimately became his inspiration for Juliette."

"Lie," the Doctor declares. "Definitely never happened."

"What makes you so sure?" River arches a challenging eyebrow, but the Doctor never breaks concentration, his eyes fixed on the nail varnish.

"Because I met him," he answers easily. "And never once did he mention a flummoxing siren of a woman with mad, curly space hair."
River snorts out a laugh at his ridiculous reasoning, but he is right. She hates it when that happens. "It was Daniel Defoe," she confesses, "and I was Moll Flanders"

"Really?" His voice hits an octave that informs her he's impressed. River simply laughs, low and secretive. She'll break the news to him about that particular adventure another day.

"Your go, sweetie."

"Alright," he dips the brush in the varnish, moving his attentions to her other foot. "I once saved Christmas with the power of song and a flying shark," he brags, and River answers immediately.

"True," she states confidently. "Mum told me all about how you gave them tickets to a crashing spaceship for their honeymoon."

"Bloody Amelia," he mutters, all hubris deflating from him and his fringe dangling in front of his eyes as he shakes his head in exasperation. "Never could keep a secret, your mum."

River deflects the comment with an impartial hum, another instance coming to mind. "That time we went to dinner on the dust rings--"

"With Sand Shoes?"

"Yes, and I refused to take off my coat because I was cold."

"Oh, definitely a lie," he snorts, breaking concentration to meet her eyes. "What was the truth, by the way?"

"I was expecting you, not Pretty Boy. And, well, I was cold because I dressed for the occasion."

It takes him a moment to catch on, confusion wrinkling his brow before River flashes him a suggestive smirk. Realization dawns, and he gulps, pitying his former self and mourning missed opportunities.

"And to think, I assumed you were smuggling something." Hazel eyes wash up and down her frame, remembering how she sat across from him, his imagination filling in all the glorious details his past self didn't know he was missing.

They've made a game out of an old necessity, unraveling old lies and rewriting all the rules to which they were once bound. There's nothing holding them back now, no timelines or paradoxes to tie their tongues. It makes the little moments seem sweeter than any former glory. Sitting before her with her feet in his lap, her husband has never looked grander. She's seen him dance around death and save the day more times than she can count, but here, in the quiet, she's never seen anything so captivating as her husband's soft, content smile.

Finishing his work, the Doctor leans back to survey her freshly-painted toes. Satisfied, he purses his lips, blowing softly as he says, "Tell me something else I don't know about you."

She snorts at the request because if he doesn't know by now, there's probably reason. A girl deserved some secrets, and she had ones that would make her husband's head spin.

"Fine," he pouts. "I'll tell you something about me."

"I studied you, honey," River rebuts, trying her best not to sound patronizing. "There's nothing I don't know."
"What about that time on Nabraxus when—"

"Yup."

"Well certainly not about when I married the Queen of the Nine Aisles because—"

"Know that one, too."

Turning wide, dismayed eyes on her, the Doctor sputters out, "How?!"

"She told me," River confesses, throaty and full of promise.

"How?" The Doctor gulps, less shocked and more intrigued.

River tosses him a smirk that sends his imagination reeling. "Persuasion."

The Doctor wets his lips, eyes a bit darker and voice a bit lower as he says, "I'd like to know that story."

"I'll bet you would." The words slip off her tongue in the form of a wicked chuckle, almost distracting him until—

"Okay! Here we go," he blurts, vindication eclipsing any naughty thoughts that may have been brewing. "That night with the Sontarans, when you were convinced there was another woman on board—"

"Because there was," she interjects, and he throws his hands up in the air.

"Yes! You! It was you, you impossible woman. Three of you, to be exact."

Rivers's eyes narrow, studying his face. Finding none of his usual tells, she finally concedes, "Alright, I guess I believe you."

"Good," he nods. "Now close your eyes and stop cheating."

"Just because I read you like a book, doesn't mean I'm cheating."

"It does when I'm losing now. Eyes. Closed."

"Well, since you asked so nicely, " River purrs. She always did like it when he went all strict. Half her life wasn't spent in a jail cell for the room service. She did it for the ready supply of handcuffs.

Taking a deep breath, River concedes to his demands and closes her eyes. After a century of marriage, she knows exactly what will come next. He wasn't the most subtle of creatures when it came to the art of seduction, not that she's complaining.

To her surprise, his voice doesn't drop low, nor do his hands stray from her freshly-manicured toes. Instead, he draws little circles on the pad of her foot, his voice overtly chipper as he says, "My favorite pastime is satellite spotting."

"Lie," River declares firmly. She'd know the answer to that even if it wasn't for the too bright inflection in his voice. "It's antiquing."

The huff that precedes her answer is all the confirmation she needs. River bites her lip, doing her best not to look too smug. A moment of silence washes over the room as he contemplates. She knows he's found his next riddle before he even opens his mouth. Epiphany cascades off him in waves,
something vulnerable wavering in his voice as he confesses, "My favorite thing about you is your hair."

Smug for a different reason entirely, River smirks and says, "True."

"It's a lie, actually," the Doctor breathes, and River's eyes open in surprise.

"Oi, Song!" he scolds, poking at her calves. "Eyes. Closed."

Giving an exasperated huff, River makes a show of rolling her eyes before conceding once more. Silence takes the room again, but it feels different this time, heavier. His hands lift away from her legs, and when he touches her, it isn't where she expects. One of his long, lightly-calloused fingers runs down the bridge of her nose, pausing at the tip to give a gentle tap.

"It's your nose," he whispers, his voice so quiet and sincere she momentarily forgets how to breathe. "Specifically, the bump in the middle."

River can count on one hand the number of times she's been rendered speechless, but as words fail to form on her tongue, she resigns herself to the scales being tipped. He's always had a fondness for her unique facial feature, she knows. But she assumed the gesture was a manifestation of how he coped with his endless need to touch. She never considered it was anything more. It's a secret in its truest form, a truth he'd never confessed, a fact she couldn't read about in a book or dig up in an old ruin. It's comforting to know they still have a few mysteries left to discover.

The realization is so endearing she doesn't even mind the smug twitch that is no doubt tugging at the corner of his mouth. When she opens her eyes, her suspicions are confirmed. Love and affection and mirth are sparkling in those hazel eyes she loves so much.

"Do you know what my second favorite thing is?" he mumbles, gently sliding her feet off his lap and turning to face her.

River smiles up at him sweetly, her fingers stroking through his messy quiff. "Tell me."

The Doctor adjusts up onto his knees, leaning over her as one hand cups her face while the other runs its way up the back of her thigh. "That spectacular bum of yours."

A possessive hand takes the liberty of squeezing said backside, and laughter rolls off River's lips like a siren’s song. He swallows the sound with his mouth, and River wraps her arms around his neck, pulling him in for a kiss. It's soft and sweet and slow because they finally have all the time in the world.

Morning finds her as it always does, too soon and never soon enough. She's exhausted, but every new sunrise means one less day until she can get back to normal, back to a warm body in bed beside her, back to breakfast on Venus and dessert in ancient Vienna. She misses unpredictability. She longs for the days when she could cram at least four impossible tasks in before breakfast, for when she could sleep until she pleased because her vortex manipulator allowed her to arrive at her lectures precisely on time. Now her days work around vitamins and bus schedules and nagging robots.

She's bound to timetables and guidelines and all those rudimentary routines that were once her playthings. If she wants lamb for tea, she has to run by the butchers by three pm on Wednesday, and if she wants a decent desk at work, she has to stake her claim on one before eleven am, otherwise she'll be left with the squeaky chair. Most importantly, if she wants to catch sight of her favorite shop opening, she has to be out the door, down the road, and seated at a coffee shop by eight am.
There are better cafes along the high street, but none of those come with a view quite like this one. It's directly across from her sweetie's shop, and on days like today, when the morning sun is warm enough to tease the oncoming summer, she sits at one of the outside tables, greedily watching from afar, hoping to catch a glimpse of him as customers filter in and out of the building. River sits back into her seat, a long exhale dragging out through her nose. Her coffee mug warms her hands, and when she takes in another deep breath, the smell of decaf is nearly enough to satisfy her weary bones. If she closes her eyes, she can almost pretend it's the real thing. But when the liquid touches her tongue, it's never quite the same, never enough to quench her thirst, never enough to fill the need or quiet the ache.

Today must be her lucky day, because the door of the shop across the street swings open in a flourish. Interest peaked, River sits a little straighter, watching as a figure that's more poster than man stumbles out of the building. Scrawny legs can be seen protruding out from beneath the heap, carrying it to an undesignated spot on the walking path. River takes in the spectacle, enjoying her front-row seat to chaos. Eventually, he empties his armful of papers onto the ground, picking them up one by one and taping them to the window. She can't make out the writing, but the font is loud, and the papers are brightly colored. All goes unexpectedly to plan until he reaches for the largest poster. It's nearly as long as he is and River watches with skeptical eyes as her gangly fool of a husband tries to wrestle the poster onto the door.

It's an advertisement for watches or waistcoats or water balloons. It's hard to take notice of such trivial things when her eyes refuse to part from his frazzled hair and crooked bow tie. His sleeves are rolled up, his worn leather shoes on the brink of untying. He looks as if he should come with a warning label and a hazard sign. Personally, River regards it as a miracle that he survives his own ridiculousness on a daily basis.

A few minutes of struggling and one discarded coat later, he lets go of the troublesome sign, tentatively stepping back to survey his work. Dusting off his hands, a satisfied nod says he's half-convinced he's finally finagled his way to success. Unfortunately, in the next moment, the adhesive fails and the edges begin to unceremoniously curl. He pounces on them before his prior efforts are totally wasted, and before she knows it, a crooked smile has stretched its way across River's cheeks.

She wonders if it refuses stick because of fault adhesive or if this is the TARDIS' way of taking her revenge. She's been known to get stroppy from time to time, and the onslaught of poorly-dressed strays constantly wandering in and out must be getting rather grating by now. Not to mention, the Old Girl wasn't one to enjoy being idle either. It's why she stole her thief in the first place. It's also why she let River steal her right out from under the Doctor's nose on so many occasions. It certainly didn't help that they chose one of the quieter decades. But if this plan was going to work, they needed to avoid trouble. When trying to lay low, the last thing they needed was him getting caught up in any disasters, natural or extraterrestrial. The best course of action was to settle in somewhere safe and quiet, preferably in a location that came with rift energy camouflage. And with Jack's team here to offer support, Cardiff had been the obvious choice.

It was easy enough to nestle the Old Girl between two buildings, where an alley used to be. The chameleon circuit hadn't even taken much effort to fix. Not physical effort, anyway. If it's any consolation to her transdimensional mother, it pained River just as much to remodel her as it was for the TARDIS to endure. Trading bright blue doors for ordinary brick walls had hurt every bit as much as watching her husband forget every facet of who and what he was. Never has there been a task more difficult than willfully letting go of everything you know and love. One would think it got easier, but no matter how many times River's been forced to walk away from the life she knew, it never fails to put new cuts on her scar tissue hearts.

Even now, it stings to see a plastic "Open" sign hanging where once it read Police Public Call Box.
But keeping him in the ship was the safest place for him. Even in stand-by mode, the Old Girl can keep an eye on him when River can't. Besides, it was his home. The Doctor belonged in the TARDIS, no matter what his current state happened to be. In all honesty, he isn't all that different. He still wears ridiculous clothes and smiles at pretty girls and trips over his own feet. Overall, it's business as usual. The only true difference just happens to be the one that matters most. She does her best to remind herself it's only temporary. It's not like he's gone, not really, not forever.

Fate sees fit to taunt her, because he's finally won the battle with the poster. Finished with his task, he scoops up his neglected coat and disappears back inside, the door slamming closed behind him. Other passersby continue to flitter along, but the street is dull now, her coffee even more lacking than usual. The lackluster beverage has gone cold, and she's debating on ordering another when duty calls in the form of Jack Harkness. His number flashes to life on her mobile phone. River opens it, somewhat regretfully, already knowing what the message will be. Just as she expected, the team needs her back at the Hub. Placing a few notes on the table, River stands, hailing a cab. She isn't waiting long before a car pulls up, and as she opens the door, River spares one last look at the shop across the street and the man who lives there. "Until the next time, sweetie," she whispers, blowing a kiss as she sinks into the taxi.

Her timeloop of normalcy persists. The day passes as they usually do, in a blur of gunfire and aliens and banter and bus rides home.

By the time she finds herself back on her favorite street, hours have past, and the moon has taken its rightful place in the Cardiff sky. It's especially quiet tonight, no wind or chipper whistling, just her flats and the way they scrape against the cobblestone road. Even the windows of her favorite shop are already closed and shrouded in darkness.

Already mourning her losses, River is about to walk past and carry on home when one of the downstairs lights bursts to life. It's bright and intrusive and completely out of sync with her nightly routine. River pauses, something heavy and unpleasant coagulating in the center of her chest. Before she can define the feeling, the door creaks open, and her husband slips out, locking it behind him. There's a skip in his step as he makes his way down the street that causes the knot in River's chest to expand until she's sure it will stop both her hearts. ‘Where could he be going this time of night?’ His hair is pushed back, and his sleeves are rolled up, and there's that eager pep in his step he always gets when he can't quite temper his excitement.

Surely he didn't have a date? Just the thought is enough to make her forget how to breathe.

But it's late, too late for a take-away, and the crumpled paper in his hand tells her this is more than just a nightly stroll. She should let him go. He doesn't remember her, after all. He doesn't know his wife and child are waiting just across the road. She should let him go about his business and have his fun. She knows that whoever he's going to see will be just another face in a long line, another story they'll laugh about when they bicker over who married whom.

And yet, even as her head screams that she shouldn't interfere, her feet have already carried her in his direction. She follows as discretely as she can, staying out of view on the other side of the street as they leave the comfort of fairy-lit trees behind. They're a few blocks away before he begins to slow, checking the street signs before making a hard left down a road she's never explored before. He rounds the corner, passing another block of flats. River picks up her pace, stalling at the edge of the building to listen. The Doctor's footsteps have stilled, and he must be only a few houses down because she hears a door creak open and–
"Hello!" the Doctor announces with fervor, and the sound of his voice is enough to tear open every wound she'd so carefully patched up and hidden away these last six months.

It sounds like music in a world of white noise, and when she hears him ask for a woman named Evey, River feels her chest constrict. The hearts that once resided there plummet into her stomach. Except there isn't much room in there these days, and the intrusion makes bile rise in the back of her throat.

"Ah! There she is!" she hears him exclaim. "Just the stunner I was looking for!" When River peaks around the corner to steal one last glance, she finds a bright smile stretched across his face, his hands rubbing together with enough enthusiasm to make a cricket jealous.

Something curious and self-destructive takes hold of her, and when he steps into the building, River finds herself pulled right along, compelled to get a closer look. As she rounds the corner, she discovers the building in question isn't a flat at all. It's a multi-purpose studio, a oversized glass window revealing a large, mostly empty room. In the center resides a collection of fold-out chairs and half a dozen elderly women. A banner that reads *Knitting for night owls* is strung across the back wall, and the laughter that bubbles in the back of River's throat is enough to make her eyes water.

A round, dark-haired woman that must be Evey swallows the Doctor in a warm embrace before directing him to a table that must be home to every inch of yarn in Cardiff. Her ridiculous husband lights up at the sight, eyes bouncing between balls of yarn like a kitten who can't decide which toy to play with first.

It's the closest she's been to him in months, the most she's seen of her lanky husband in what feels like years. River drinks in what little she can from beyond the glass, a sad smile curling her cheeks and softening her eyes as she immerses herself in this new life he made for himself. More than anything, she wishes she could be a part of it. She wishes she could be inside, be that much closer to him. What she'd give to hear his voice again, even if it was only as a fly on the wall.

*Her mother looks stunning, and her father looks besotted, and her husband looks like an absolute lunatic. His hands can't seem to pick an altitude, stretched over his head one moment and snapping down by his hips the next. She'd know just where to put them if only she dared go inside. But she can't be a part of the memories they're making now. It's far too early for that, for family outings and quick kisses in broom closets. She knew these days would come, that she'd run out of Amy's that knew her and husbands that loved her. When it comes to the Doctor, the things you want always seem to be just out of reach. There's no touching him, not really. No matter how close one gets, you're still on the wrong side of the glass, always an outsider looking in.*

Another wave of nausea creeps up on her, throat going dry and her head suddenly light. Something hot and thick that feels suspiciously like last night's supper burns it's way up her esophagus, and River's hand flies up to cover her mouth.

She's going to be sick.

A quick glance over the road reveals an off-license, and River bolts for the doors of the small shop. Even in her current state, she must still look like a force of nature, because the attendant doesn't even attempt to protest as River barges into the building and heads straight for the toilets. It's filthy, but she hardly notices as she lifts the lid and purges her stomach. When the offending substance is gone, River sits back, a clammy hand dragging over her face. It's been months since she's been ill. As she
flushes and makes her way to the sink, River hopes this particular occurrence is down to Ethan's poor culinary skills and not a belated side effect of Time Lord pregnancy.

Or maybe she's just getting sick. The woman looking back at her in the mirror certainly looks the part. Her skin is pale, and her eyes aren't shining as bright as they once did. River lets out a sigh, promising herself that tomorrow she'll get an extra hour of sleep. For now, she makes do with splashing her face with tap water, tapping at her cheeks until a respectable amount of pink blooms. Satisfied, River vacates the lavatory, making for the exit as quickly as possible. Luckily for her, the shopkeeper is busy, allowing River to escape onto the streets without any awkward explanations.

Returned safely to the outside world, River makes her way back across the street, allowing herself one last look at her sweetie before heading home. Except this time, when she gazes in through the window, the Doctor is nowhere to be found. He's gone, vanished before she could steal one last glimpse. Disappointment and panic flood her body in unison because she knows better than most that the streets of Cardiff are no place to wander alone at night, not when he's vulnerable and clueless and human.

He can't have gotten far, and River takes a quick step back, prepared to scour every inch of this city when her body collides with a tall, lanky figure. The form before her squeaks, familiar hands reaching out to steady her.

"Blimey, are you alright?" It isn’t and it can't be, and yet when the disorientation fades, River is met with a sight that nearly steals her breath. "I'm such an oaf. I didn't hurt you, did I?"

Stunned, River blinks up into the face of her husband like she's seeing the sun for the very first time. His eyes are wide and friendly and empty in every way that matters most. Oh, but they're brown and green and gold, and it's the closest she's been to a galaxy since the day they parted. The hands resting on her shoulders are warm and steadying, centering her in a way she'd forgotten possible. He's touching her for the first time in months. It's nothing more than an apologetic gesture, lasting no longer than a fraction of a moment, and yet her skin sings at the subtle contact.

It burns and it's beautiful, and all she can think to blurt is, "You dropped something."

She regrets it instantly because his eyes break from hers, disentangling himself. River follows his gaze, finding a plethora of chocolates and sweets littering the ground by their feet.

"It's not all for me," he declares, bending over to gather the treats into his long arms. "Well, the Haribo is. I got chocolate for the girls. They can't have the chewy bits. Messes with their dentures and— wait a minute. I know you!"

Her hearts stop and stutter and beat earnestly for the first time in months. "You… you do?" she asks, trying her best to keep her voice even. Her heart must be racing because the baby kicks in that way he only ever does when she's holding the fate of the world in her dainty hands.

"You get coffee at the cafe across from my shop," he explains, and River's shocked expression must make him nervous, because he's quick to clarify, "Not that I watch you! I just noticed. I do that from time to time."

"Notice things?" River queries. It's a guilty pleasure that she shouldn't indulge, but she can't help drinking in every movement as the man before her nods, hair falling into his eyes.

"Oh, yeah. Mostly odd things. Not that you're odd!" His hand flies out, protesting of its own accord, and nearly dropping his candy again. "It's just that you're pregnant at a coffee shop. It's curious. I didn't think pregnant women could have caffeine."
"I have decaf," she answers easily, and his nose crinkles.

"Bit masochistic, isn't it, being so near to something you can't have?"

Oxygen lodges in her throat, mouth bobbing for only a moment before she forces herself to answer. "I like being reminded of it, I suppose."

Even as he hums, accepting her answer, River knows she's playing with fire. She should turn and walk away as quickly as she can. She never should have followed him here in the first place. She never intended to speak to him. She was supposed to stay away. She promised.

"Why do we have to split up?" The words tumble out in a defensive hiss because, "No one has more experience keeping you safe than me."

The Doctor pauses, defeated as he takes her hands in his. "It's not me I'm worried about," he sighs, gazing down at their entwined fingers. "I can't risk them finding you through me."

River opens her mouth to argue, but the Doctor is quicker.

"Please, River. It's my turn to keep you safe."

She's never been so angry, so outraged and agonized. Her fingers twitch to slap the martyr right out of him, her tongue eager to lash out against his need for self-sacrifice. The trouble is, he's never looked so desperate. The pain in his eyes is enough to subdue her, to give her strength enough to quell her own emotions, taming them the way the moon does the tide.

"I only have one request," he states, and never before has his voice sounded more like a loaded gun. He hesitates, a nervous tongue sneaking out to moisten his lips. The stillness that follows rolls across her skin like the calm before a storm. The hairs on the back of her neck prickle, and she knows that whatever words may follow will tear down her world. "You have to keep your distance, River. You have to be strong, because we both know that if you speak to me, I won't be able to resist you."

She answers him with silence, tongue in knots and protests lodged in the back of throat, because though he may be right, he may as well have asked her hearts to forget how to beat.

"Promise me," he pleas, squeezing her hands to his like a lifeline. "Promise me you'll keep our baby safe. Promise me you'll stay away."

"What brings you way over here?" Lost for answers, River's eyes flash to the studio, and the Doctor's face brightens. "Are you here for knitting class?"

"No," she corrects quickly, and oh, it's hard to walk away when everything about him is begging her to stay. "Just... out walking."

The smile slips from his lips, replaced by a disapproving frown. "You shouldn't be out here at night, you know, especially in your condition."

River says nothing, biting back a smile because she's easily the most dangerous thing this side of Jupiter. But the chocolatey eyes gazing down at her are so full of concern that something inside her melts. Her fingers tingle to wipe over his brow and soothe away his worry lines. It's the same hand that he wrapped in silk, that he healed, and held so tightly in his tomb. It's the one he pressed his lips
to when she promised not to interfere.

The oath binds her, her hand coming to rest on her stomach because the child inside her is the closest thing to him she's permitted to touch.

An abrupt banging in the form of a cane against the studio window causes them both to jump. Twisting around, a woman can be seen on the other side of the glass, summoning the Doctor inside.

The moment shattered, he clears his throat, gesturing behind her. "I should probably…"

"Right, of course," River agrees, stepping aside to let him pass.

"Not that I want to," he adds. "It's just that the girls get feral if I deprive them of sugar for too long."

A small chuckle falls from River's lips. He always did love to surround himself with feisty women. "Wouldn't want to keep the girls waiting."

Regretfully, he steps past her, flashing a smile that's every bit as lopsided and perfect as she remembers. But he stalls, turning to face her as he slowly backs away. "You should come into my shop some time."

It's a question and an invitation and a terrible, naughty, very bad idea.

"Maybe I will," River agrees, because she never was very good at staying out of trouble.

His whole face lights up at her answer, flashing a smirk so hopeful and tempting it's almost enough to convince her it's worth the risk as he responds, "Looking forward to it."
A leap of faith

Chapter Summary

She shouldn't. She really, really shouldn't. And yet, her feet continue to carry her across the cobblestone street, past the cafe, and over the road. A quiet voice in her mind guides her, the id inside her as subtle as a whisper on the wind as it encourages, just a quick peek won't hurt.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay everyone! Life got in the way. I hope the chapter is worth the wait. Also, there is a Rust and Stardust flashback toward the end. So, heads up, if you didn't read the prequel, you might be a tad confused.

"A ship is safest in the harbor, but that is not what ships are built for." -John A Shedd

Alarms blare, the screeching in her ears deafening her to all else. Red emergency lights flash, and the oxygen must be getting thin, because her lungs burn like fire as she bolts her way through the corridors. River rounds the corner the same time the ship hits the upper atmosphere, the whole structure lurching beneath her feet. The impact nearly slams her into the wall, and she barely finds her balance before forcing herself to carry on. It's more difficult to run now, with gravity tugging the ship this way and that. River pushes forward, weaving with the spacecraft like she was made for dancing on air currents.

Another jolt tells her the backup thrusters have failed, and she's infinitely glad she didn't waste any time putting out an SOS. There wasn't time, and even if there had been, no one is around to answer anyway. Well, no one but the dozen members of her first year Aeronautical Distress class. Her professor permitted them to time travel to the crash site under one condition: observe and report only. No interfering with events.

River would argue that course correcting the ship's descent pattern wasn't technically a violation of this rule. It isn't tampering if you're only following the recipe already set by history books. In her opinion, there's really only one way to properly observe a crashing ship, and River was nothing if not dedicated to her studies.

Bolting around another corner, she reaches her destination. The hanger door is waiting, solid steel separating her from her escape plan. It'll take a bit of persuasion to get them open, as the unscheduled landing will have activated the craft's safety protocols. The override switch is mounted on the wall, protected by a thick layer of glass. An ice pick or a stiletto would do the job nicely, and River makes a mental note to never leave home without a multifunctional pair of shoes. As for now, she'll have to settle for breaking the glass the old fashioned way.
Tearing off the bottom hem of her shirt, River wraps it around her knuckles. Throwing her whole body into the swing, her fist collides with the glass. She's met with hardly any resistance, the fibers shattering on impact. The sting that accompanies the blow tells her she didn't make it through unscathed, a particularly sharp pain informing her there's a shard of glass making itself at home under the skin on the back of her hand. But there's no time to fuss over cuts and scrapes, and so River ignores the way her tendons protest as she stretches her fingers and wraps them around the emergency pull switch. Another troublesome shard makes itself known as she flexes. River ignores the ache in her palm as she yanks the lever downward.

A heavy lock disengages, and the hanger doors open with a force that nearly takes them off their hinges. Her grip on the lever tightens as the sudden pressure change attempts to rip her off her feet. She's on the precipice, and beyond the imagined safety of the metal walls lies nothing but daunting emptiness. The ship is plummeting through open air, and below, she can see the planet's surface rapidly approaching. Jagged rocks await her, but through the mountains of granite cuts her only hope. An angry current of tar-like liquid has carved a path through a narrow valley, and if River's calculations are correct, the ship's descent pattern should sail directly over her destination. As the ship continues to plummet, the brown rapids of the river grow in clarity. It's much more menacing as it comes into view. The water is angry and muddy and not at all ideal, but it's a hell of a lot more forgiving than the shard-like stone that cradles the water flow.

All in all, not too bad for her first crashing space ship. River watches as she descends from the heavens, content with the knowledge that everyone worth saving has been evacuated. The skyline is a breathtaking mix of purples and oranges. If it is the last thing she sees, well, it could have been worse.

Teetering on the small ledge, the skyline slipping further and further away, her grip on cool steel is the one thing separating her from oblivion. Her hearts are racing, and yet, she finds that she isn't afraid. She is so so alive. Leaping off the swing set had always been her favorite activity as a child. She supposes the mechanics of this are the same. It's all about timing, about the courage to jump, to surrender and let gravity do the work.

The left engine fails, her side of the craft tipping until all River can see out of the hanger doors is the tumultuous water beneath. Impact is imminent. It's now or never, and seeing her chance, River takes it. Pulse thundering in her ears and a smirk tugging at her lips, River closes her eyes and jumps.

She shouldn't. She really, really shouldn't. And yet, her feet continue to carry her across the cobblestone street, past the cafe, and over the road. A quiet voice in her mind guides her, the id inside her as subtle as a whisper on the wind as it encourages, just a quick peek won't hurt.

River steps up onto the sidewalk, mere feet from the door. She can just barely see inside the tinted windows, making out the vague outline of cluttered shelves and coatracks. She's never been this near before, never dared to get a closer look. What if he saw her? Or worse, what if he didn't? If she walked in and out of his shop and he never spared her a second glance...

Well, some scars still sting long after the wound is healed.

But he had seen her. His curious gaze singled her out at a crowded coffee shop. He recognized her on a dim lit street and invited her into his life the first chance he had. He did everything he warned her he would do. 'Like a moth to a flame', he'd said. And yet, as River stands toe-to-toe with temptation, she can't help but worry she's the one that's going to get burned.
A flurry of limbs appears by the window, and River takes a sharp inhale, holding it in like a secret, as if any sound will give her away. He's dressed the same, that madman uniform he wears so well, with rolled up sleeves and braces holding his trousers in place around his slender hips. He's spinning around the TARDIS as he always has, a whirlwind on a mission, and River observes as he stands on a stool, tip-toeing precariously as he reaches for a tall glass vase off the top shelf.

The stool has an agenda of its own, because it wiggles just enough for the Doctor to lose his footing. Thrown sideways, he nearly drops the object, and a small laugh slips, unbidden, from River's lips. Prize in hand, he hops off the stool, turning. His eyes pin on her through the window and River freezes. She watches, hearts frozen in her chest as he shakes the hair out of his face, his free hand giving a shy wave before mouthing the words, 'Coming in?'

River shakes her head, declining, as she points up the road toward the bus she really should be catching. His smile slips, the tiniest ounce of hope draining from his expression. What little resolve River carried inside her shatters under his disappointed stare. He fancies her. He met her once, and he fancies her.

_Dammit._ She hates it when he's right.

With a small, timid nod, he backs away, disappearing into the shop. She should keep walking. She should heed his warnings and go to her bus. She should find a new coffee shop and wait out these next few months like she promised she would. At a distance. Safe.

River takes a step, and she swears it's meant to be away from the entrance. But she never could stand to see him frown. She'd do anything to spare him pain and walking away would cause just that. Sure, he'll be angry later, but if their twisted timelines taught her anything, it's that it's always better to beg forgiveness than ask permission. Life's always a little more worth living when it comes with a risk. Either way, he's going to be disappointed, so she may as well get something out of it. She finds herself pulled toward the entrance, toward the TARDIS, toward him, and reaching for the door is like falling. _Emptiness is all that surrounds her as the skyline slips away._ She's weightless and helpless, a slave to gravity as it demands she fall down down down. She cuts through the air like a hot blade through butter. It retaliates by coiling its invisible fingers around her chest, so tight and fast she can't breathe. The wind whips around her, her own curls lashing out at her face and eyes until the world around her is a blur of purple sky and black granite.

And then her fall is broken, any air she may have saved in her lungs forced out by the impact. Her calculations must have been correct because water folds around her, swallowing her. A figure leaps in after and monsters must dwell in these waters because claws wrap around her wrists. She fumbles for her knife, but it's grip is too strong. Her lungs scream, demanding their fair share. River thrashes, and the figure before her stills, because it isn't claws at all. It's hands, pulling her toward the surface. Warmth radiates out from where they meet, and there's music in her head, singing in a language she shouldn't understand. 'Home,' it tells her. 'Safe. Still.' But the words are just words. They hold no meaning, not to her, not to lost little girls who've spent their lives running from spacesuits and monsters who call themselves owner.

The lack of oxygen makes her head light, and she's trying to fight, but a sedative has taken hold of her veins. _Her vision starts to fail, going dark around the edges, and it's only then that she notices the water isn't. It's not muddy or black. It tastes as fresh as spring, and the rapids aren't dragging her downstream. The current is placid, the shadowy figure pulling her up up up to the surface._ River lets herself be dragged along, cradled like a child.

When she breaks the surface, lips are on hers. Not a kiss, but a breath, filling her lungs until she coughs and it burns and there's a faraway voice that's chanting her name like mantra.
"River? River, are you all right?"

When her vision clears, she sees neutral-colored walls and a vaulted ceiling. A smooth surface at her back and warm hands on her face as her eyes drag to the figure hovering above her. It's a silhouette against artificial light, a mop of brown hair and a soaking wet button-down shirt.

"Doctor?" she rasps, looking up into his worried hazel eyes. He shushes her by way of answer, a soothing hum to his voice as he refuses to meet her gaze, choosing instead to scan her torso and limbs. His vision catches on her bloodied hand, the damage looking worse than it is due to the water. His long fingers twitch like they mean to reach for it, and River pulls away her injured limb, hiding it from view.

She hasn't seen him in months, only a handful of times since Berlin. It isn't much, but it's been enough to teach her that it makes him angry when she's reckless, even more so when she's hurt. 'Be careful', he's always insisting, a desperation in his eyes she's yet to understand, though she suspects one day it will be painfully clear. She tries, from time to time, to be the good girl that he begs her to be, that her mother believes she is. It never lasts long, of course, and it's hard to feel guilty when misbehaving always leads her right into his arms. Not to say it's him she looks forward to, but rather the danger that nips at his heels and the thrill of the forbidden that burns in her bones whenever he's near.

"What the hell were you playing at?" he scolds, frowning down at her. There are worry lines creasing his brow, the picture of disapproval.

River laughs, a scratchy, slightly choked noise in the back of her throat. "Research."

An exasperated breath escapes him as he reaches past her for his discarded coat. His fingers close around it, but when he pulls it close, it isn't for himself. Those wiry arms of his fold around her shoulders, wrapping her in his coat as he helps her sit upright.

"Last I checked, skydiving wasn't a part of the archaeological core curriculum."

River scoffs at his overly protective gesture even as she pulls the jacket tighter around herself, welcoming the feel of something dry. "I wanted top marks."

The Doctor pays her banter little mind, already working his jaw as he bites out, "It was stupidly dangerous. You can't expect me to just know -"

A defensive shiver that has nothing to do with her wet clothes ripples up River's spine. "I don't expect anything from you," she snaps, cutting him off with words as sharp as the glass embedded in her palm. "If I'm such an inconvenience, you should have just let me fall. It's not as if I asked you to catch me."

He flinches like she's slapped him, face faltering and lips twitching with some retaliation that's just begging to escape. Common sense wins over confession, because what he says is only a fracture of what his eyes tell her. "That's the problem," he mutters, looking away in frustration.

From this angle, the wrath of a Time Lord is nowhere near as terrifying as the Madame always told her it would be. He isn't a monster or a beast. He's a wounded child that wants for something he cannot have. Curiosity pricks at her insides the way it always does when he gets that far-off look in his eyes, and River wants nothing more than to grab his chin and make him look at her until she can decipher his expressions the way she can dead languages. But he hides his eyes the way she hides her damaged hand, and maybe that's just the way it is between them- never show the other what they don't want to see.
"You didn't leave a note," he says softly, gaze so distant it's almost as if he isn't speaking to her at all, but rather fate itself. "How can I catch you if you don't tell me when you jump?"

It isn't the defense she anticipated, not from him, not from anyone. It's difficult to unlearn the lessons of one's youth, when words like trust and home are things she was never taught. She's never been one for faith. In an orphanage, a very long time ago, she learned that the only person who can save you is yourself. And yet, he's here. He cares, there's no denying that. He looks at her in ways no one ever has before, likes she's more than just an endgame. He holds her like a heart rather than a hand grenade. What's more, he comes looking for her when no one else does.

"You seem to have found me just fine," River responds, quieter and more tender than before, drawing him back to the now. But it's more question than comment, and he answers her with a slight blush, which can only mean- "You read my paper, didn't you?"

"Of course not," he answers too quickly, squaring his shoulders. "I wouldn't dirty my hands with a paper on archaeology."

The tone of his voice puts a smug curl in the corner of her cheek. But it's the way he looks at her that really gives him away, the glint in his eye that makes her ask questions she knows she shouldn't. Like why the TARDIS makes the voices in her head go quiet and why he's so quick to wrap his coat around the shoulders of his assassin.

He fidgets under her knowing stare, and River grants him the small victory, breaking her eyes from his to examine her surroundings. Finally bringing herself to look at something besides him, she sees that she's sitting beside an Olympic-sized swimming pool. The double doors guarding the entrance of the pool are wide open, the purple skyline she left behind still waiting on the other side. A cloud of smoke rises in the distance, and it must be what's left of the ship she abandoned.

"So what do you want me to do, exactly?" River asks, because suddenly the notion isn't nearly as far-fetched as it had been a moment ago. "Phone you up like my own personal Time Lord taxi service every time I fancy jumping out of a space ship?"

"Don't be ridiculous." His lips purse, hiding a smirk, brow furrowed in a way she can't quite read as he answers, "You know I never answer my phone."

She opens the door to the shop, and the TARDIS washes over her like sunshine in her veins. Warm and bright even as the room around her is cluttered and dingy. Her eyes don’t have much time to drink in her surroundings because a crash to her left draws her attention. She turns to find the Doctor struggling with something behind the counter. He's quite the sight, and she watches for a moment, amused, as he fumbles with the wrong end of a pry bar to open the till. It's hardly the first time she's witnessed him having a row with an inanimate object. Clearing her throat, River makes her presence known. The Doctor pauses, wide eyes tearing away from his current foe. When his gaze lands on her, the shock warms into pleasant familiarity.

"The coffee masochist!" He beams, standing straight and abandoning his next attack.

"You alright over there?" River queries, a wry smile tugging at her cheeks.

"Of course!" He makes a show of tapping the machine with the handle of his makeshift weapon. To his regret, the drawer retaliates with a rather alarming clank as a spring flies into the air, landing just beyond his shoulder. River arches an amused brow, and he steps in front of it, a tight-lipped smile stretched across his cheeks. "Never mind that. That always happens. Just, uh, give me a mo', yeah? Have a look around."
River concedes gladly, turning away with a smirk. Taking in a deep breath through her nose, she feels more at home than she has in months. The tingle of time is always inside her, always there, hidden like a secret and as subtle as her beating hearts. But inside the TARDIS is where her time sense is the strongest. She can see the whole universe behind her eyes, feel all of time and space coursing like a live wire through her veins. After being away so long, it's almost disorienting, like a sailor adjusting to the sea after becoming accustomed to dry land.

Nevertheless, her feet guide her through the room, past tables littered with tawdry quirks and miscellaneous knick-knacks. On the walls hang portraits and paintings from every century. Da Vinci sits alongside Salvador Dali and a lesser-known Van Gogh he probably thinks is a fake is on offer for ten quid. Walking through these walls is reminiscent to what it's like swimming through his mind, a sea of memories cluttered with priceless treasures, dusty and humble and full of endless stories.

A bookshelf takes up most of the back wall. It's dark mahogany wood is coated in a fine layer of dust, hardbacks of various shapes and sizes stacked haphazardly along the shelves. River drinks in the covers, ancient texts and classics mingled with authors that haven't even been born yet. The undisturbed dust tells her no one has taken notice. She shakes her head, eyes scanning the lower shelves. Her focus catches on one row, cleaner than the rest. On it sits titles that are all too familiar. The Angel's Kiss propped up against Summer Falls, and she must admit, it isn't what she thought she'd find. She expected his shop to look less like a museum and more like the TARDIS wardrobe, with rows upon rows of hideous scarves and hats and period dresses.

River watches from the wardrobe doorway, his back to her as he sits atop a pile of coats she doubts have ever been worn. The Victorian jacket he's taken to most recently is nowhere to be found, and her hearts flutter at the thought that he's finally moving on. On the other side of the room, a top hat tumbles off the top shelf, and River's eyes unwillingly break from her husband to seek out the source of the disturbance.

A petite, dark-haired girl is ankle deep in scarves, and oh, there's that flutter again. River can't define what, but there's something about her that makes her a mirror of all the rest. Gorgeous and young, strong-willed and radiating naivety. This girl must be new because that innocent streak he so desperately craves still runs a mile wide. He'll steal it from her one day, sip at it like a fine wine until yet another Lost Boy outgrows him.

Until that day comes, she'll be good for him, River thinks. It was about time he got off that cloud and found someone new. She was getting rather sick of seeing him mope about the TARDIS. He smiles the brightest when there's an audience around. It aches that she won't be the one to see it anymore, but the eyes of another make it easier for him to see the wonder. The spoils and secrets of the universe are always best when shared.

"Nope. No way," the dark-haired girl announces, holding a signed piece of parchment in her hand. "I'm calling your bluff on this one. There is no way you were ghost hunting with Charles Dickens."

"Well, of course not," the Doctor scoffs. "Actual ghosts aren't real, Clara. They were aliens."

The girl purses her lips, underwhelmed as she confesses, "There was a time I would have been phased by that sentence." Then she shrugs and goes back to plundering.

The Doctor hasn't turned around, and the absence of seeing his face is suddenly unbearable. River finds herself being pulled into the room because the gravity of him has never been a force she could fight. River slips deeper into the enormous closet like the wraith she is, leaving nothing disturbed. There are no sounds as she steps, and she wonders if he misses it, the clicking of her heels across the TARDIS console. She touches nothing, the feel of memories under fingertips a luxury she is no longer allowed. As funny as it may sound, she thinks physical pain might be what she misses most.
It's not something she can feel in the database, not when broken bones don't bleed and scars never stay. Try as she might, CAL can never get the sensation quite right. Describing pain to a computer was like trying to explain fire to a fish.

"What's this from?" Clara shouts from across the other end of the wardrobe. Whatever it is she's holding must be activated by touch because an abrasive, Kazoo-like whistle fills the air.

The noise ceases abruptly, followed by a clatter, and the Doctor answers without ever looking over his shoulder. "It's a ceremonial instrument. Best not touch."

Inwardly, River tsks him because by "ceremony", he means ritualistic mating horn, a fact he and her parents discovered the hard way. The abject horror on her father's face when he recounted the tale is something River will never forget, and without her permission, a quiet chuckle slips out between her lips.

In that moment, she swears she sees him flinch. It must be a trick of the light because as soon as it happens, it's gone. She cons herself sometimes, letting that sickness called hope fill her mind with far-flung fantasies. Every now and again when his breathing changes or his words stall in his throat, she fools herself into thinking that maybe, just maybe, he can sense her presence. But the truth is, she is just a shadow, a memory, an epilogue of a closed book. He can't possibly have heard her, not now, not all the times before, not ever again.

Silently, she glides closer, guided by her long-suffering, masochistic urge to uncover secrets and study that which does not belong to her. This particular ancient artifact isn't buried by sand, but rather, invisible walls. In days long past, she could tear them down with a single touch. Her fingertips would play connect the dots with the freckles on his shoulders until his fortresses crumbled into ruins.

But now she can't even make out the title of the book that so consumes his attention. Inches have become miles, intimacy turned to solitude, because the line between life and death seems to be the only border she cannot cross.

"Well this is a very daring shade of lippy," the brown-eyed girl teases, popping it open to test the color on her own lips.

The Doctor stirs this time, twisting in his seat and giving River her first glimpse of his face. "That's from Marylyn Monroe," his voice is light, but his posture is frigid. He wears her mother's glasses like a shield. The smile on his face is a lie, turning down at the corners and lacking all the joviality he possessed a moment ago.

"You do get around, don't you?" The girl sounds impressed, giggling at his expense as she rummages further into the case.

Her husband settles back into his seat, and if he stared any harder at those crisp pages, River's sure he would burn a hole right through the cover. There was a time she would have perched on the arm of his chair and run her fingers through his hair, when he would have read aloud to her as she memorized every micro-expression as if his face were a work of art.

He reads in silence now, and it kills her in ways that sickness and bullets and a burst of electricity never did. River watches the Doctor, scrutinizing the change in him, dissecting him in all the ways she knows best. That edge to him is back, the one he gets when he's alone. Like there's an itch just beneath his skin, some bad thought he's trying to keep at bay, some pain he can't quite shake.

"And what about this little number? Does this belong to Marylyn, too?"
The Doctor glances up at the summons, eyes peaking over the rim of her mother’s glasses. Color drains from his face instantly, causing River's attentions to snap to his newest companion. The girl is holding a green dress, her green dress. It's neatly pressed and hung, exactly as River left it. A bit of dirt stains the hem, and River wonders if her perfume clings to the fabric as well. Is it still tangible and warm in all the ways she can no longer be?

"Doctor?" the girl prompts, shaking both River and her husband from their silent stupor.

"Hmm? Oh, sorry." He clears his throat, avoiding her gaze and busying his hands by tucking his book away. "Not Marylyn, no."

"What's wrong?" Clara asks with a frown, her round, calculating eyes narrowing on the dress before sliding back to the Doctor.

"Nothing." He gets up from his seat, striding toward the young girl. His back is to River now, but whatever expression he’s wearing is enough to make the girl's eyes go wide again. He snatches the dress from her hand, careful only to touch the hanger, strategic fingers avoiding the cloth as if it might burn him. And maybe it's best that he can't see her. If he can't even touch her things, how would he possibly hold her in his arms?

He carefully places the dress back on the shelf, the same place he keeps everything that belonged to them. Their room archived and collecting dust, the places they went flagged and filed away, never to be visited again. Even her, saved and bookmarked, tucked away like a memory best forgotten.

Turning his back on what's left of her, he makes to exit the room. The girl hasn't moved to follow, chilled or stunned or curious as she calls after him, "If not Marylyn, then who?"

The Doctor doesn't stop. If anything, his pace quickens, his face set in stone, as cold and hard as the marble headstone River will never have. As he marches past, she swears she hears him mumble, "A ghost."

"Penny for your thoughts?" Comes a voice from behind her, startling River from her past. She must look dazed or confused, because he opens his palm, gesturing around the room. "The shop, what do you think?"

Swallowing back the memory, River plants herself firmly in the present as she says, "I was just admiring your book collection."

His thin brows climb in surprise, bandy legs guiding him to her side. "You're familiar with the Melody Malone series?"

"I've dabbled," River smirks, "She's brilliant," he professes, gaze shifting to the book in question. The cover is worn from use, and she wonders if the last page is still missing. Does he still prefer it that way, when not all mysteries are solved and stories don't ever end?

The faceless figure on the front reminds her of all the things she used to hide and her lips purse. "I've never been fond of the cover art."

"I love them," he announces, and River arches a brow at his bold confession. He wastes no time, flushing as he explains, "They're mysterious and daring. That's what her books are all about, breaking the mold and making a statement."
River hums at his insight. It's curious. Between the running and the mysteries and Rule One, they
never really had time for small talk before. They were too busy dodging unanswerable questions,
buying time, and stealing kisses, too busy fighting fate to let the air between them go stale. It feels
odd, like a pebble in one's shoe, limping on in spite of discomfort.

The Doctor feels it too, because he runs a hand through his messy hair, then down to rub at the back
of his neck. Her chest warms to see it because for an ageless god, he certainly is precious when he
fidgets.

"Would you like to see the rest of her?" he invites, taking a few steps back, a spider luring a fly into
it's web.

"Her?" River questions, ever the eager victim as she follows, just as willing as she always has been,
as everyone inevitably does. There's no resisting him when that impish smile flashes just the right
amount of teeth to make ones heart skip a beat.

"My shop," he chirps, offering an easy explanation. "Well, The Shop is her proper name."

He's always loved a little shop, and the thought puts a chuckle in her tone, because some things
never change. "Wherever did you come up with such a creative title?"

"She has a little bit of everything. It seemed appropriate." Giving a playful shrug, he adds, "I'd warn
you that the till was broken, but there's no point because you won't buy anything anyway."

River quirks a brow, fighting a smirk. "Because masochists only look and never buy?"

"No," he huffs. "Coz everything's rubbish." River laughs, and he preens like the sound is an air-born
elixir. "Take this, for example." The next thing she knows, he's skipping toward the corner of the
room, scooping up an object and tossing it to her.

River catches it, hands molding around smooth plastic. "It's a Magic Eight Ball," she states flatly.

"Will I purchase anything today?" she asks aloud, making a show of shaking it softly. Turning it
over in her hands, the words "Cannot predict" materialize in the blueish gel. Making her way to his
side, River rattles the toy again. This time it answers, "Reply hazy." It appears he hadn't been
exaggerating, and an exasperated smile works its way up her cheeks when a third attempt reveals,
"Better not tell you now."

"Is it always so infuriating?" she questions, and an amused smirk twitches in the corner of his mouth.

"Ask it yourself," he instructs, a knowing glint in his eye.

She humors him, giving it a final shake and glancing down to find, "It is certain" bobbing up at her.
"I must admit," River muses. "I've never been sassed by a children's toy before."

"There's a first time for everything," he grins.

His mood is infectious, and River feels warmth blossom in her chest as she deposits the Eight Ball
back on the shelf. As she does so, a dull, archaic chalice catches her eye. River reaches for it without
a second thought. "What's this?"

"I believe it's the cup that poisoned Rasputin." Nimble fingers pluck it from her hands, tossing it into
the air with a silly, careless smile. "Decent replica. Great paperweight."
"Actually," River adds, stealing the relic back and examining it with mild interest, "the cyanide had no effect on him. Neither did the gunshots or the beating, really. When they pulled The Mad Monk out of the water days later, the binds they found him in showed signs of struggle. Arguably, it's much more likely he died of hypothermia." Bored of the trinket, River places it back on the shelf. "But if you really want to talk about hardy leaders, Castro's your man. He survived over six hundred and thirty assassination attempts. Say what you will about his policies, but the man definitely knows how to dodge an assassination attempt."

When her eyes slip back to the Doctor, she finds him blinking at her, impressed, if not slightly alarmed. "You're very... informed."

River shrugs. "Old hobby of mine."

"History or murdering dictators?" There's a smirk twitching at the corner of his lips, and it only broadens when she answers-

"Yes."

A pleased expression steals over his whole face, eyes sparkling. "What did you say your name was?"

"I didn't," she teases, all enigma and invitation.

The door dings and hazel eyes break from hers to search out the entryway. His expression brightens with familiarity, offering a half-hearted wave to what must be one of his regulars. River's eyes stay locked on him, following the path of his sharp jaw to linger over the smirk just beginning to curl his lips.

When his gaze finds hers again, his pupils are a little wider, mirth sparkling along swirls of brown and gold. "I could keep calling you the masochist, I suppose."

"You can if you like," River purrs, eyes a little greener, because it's just so easy to fall back into old habits. "But most people know me by a different title."

He doesn't disappoint, inclining his head towards her and dropping the tone of his voice. "And what's that?"

"River," he sighs, so quiet and hopeful. "Who are you?"

"You're going to find out very soon now." The confession sparks a new thrill behind his eyes, a long-awaited puzzle on the brink of being solved. He's so delighted it pains her to carry on, to warn him in the only way she can. "And I'm sorry, but that's when everything changes."

River finds herself sobering because the flirting has always been the easy part. Their banter has always flowed from her lips as naturally as air does from her lungs. It's the truth that only ever seems to get harder.

"River," she gives her name hesitantly, quietly, like she's imparting some great secret. It sits in the air between like a sacrifice presented at an alter, weighed, measured, and judged. Her eyes never leave his, scanning his face for any hint of recognition. River watches as his eyebrows lift, his lips twitching into a smile.
"Lovely name," he observes, shoving his hands into his pockets and rocking back and forth on his heels, contemplating. "I like it. It suits you. Much better than mine at any rate. It's John, by the way."

She intentionally hadn't asked for his. She didn't want to hear it, didn't want to form the false name with her tongue, and she postpones the inevitable moment as long as is polite before finally-

"Hello, John." It tastes a little bit like the last time she called him by that name, like the pools at the center of the universe and his mouth and long-brewing lust that finally breached the surface. It feels like the dull ache in the back of her mind as the cool rush of liquid energy pulsed around their bodies. It sounds like remorse, like his voice when he stumbled over explaining why kissing her felt wrong. She understands now, why his lips break from hers, the grip on her hips less desperate than it was a moment ago. His face is pale and stricken, some horrible revelation written across his sad, hungry eyes as he breathes, "I can't do this."

The memory is bitter on her tongue, and River wonders if her expression now is as torn as his was then.

"Does the little one have a name yet?"

His voice floats through the air, but it doesn't quite reach her ears. Her brain too full of the past to focus on the present. Her puzzled eyes find his, following his gaze to the hand she's placed protectively over her belly. There's a thumping against her palm, out of sync with the beating of her hearts. He always does this when she runs, his little feet pounding against the womb as hers do against pavement. But she isn't running now. She's standing still, eyes fixed on the Doctor, and a ball swells in her throat because there's just so much he doesn't know. His fingers flex in a nervous twitch, and River tries not to think about the life beneath her palm and how he's never felt his child wiggle, how he doesn't know that garlic makes her gag and loud noises make their son do summersaults.

"No," she confesses, stunned and sad and distant as that nauseous feeling makes itself known once more. "No, we never picked out a name."

"We?" he asks, tilting his head curiously. There's a hint of a frown pinching his brow, and she knows he's hinting about the father. River's lips part, but no words come because what is there to say when he is right before her and yet doesn't exist.

Reality chills any warmth that may have spread into her veins because everything about him is the same, and yet he is different. Right now, he is not hers, and no one is to blame but fate. There is an absence in his eyes, and it does little more than make the hole in her chest grow larger. The space between them is not what it ought to be. Its too big and too small. It's bitter and bland like a bite of one’s favorite food that's gone out of date.

He is standing before her, and yet she cannot touch him, and it's all too familiar. She feels like an intruder, a thief, delighting in something that doesn't belong to her. That's the trouble with making homes out of people. When they leave you, there's no where to run to and the best you can be is lost. Photographs and memories and echoes just aren't enough. Suddenly all their exchanges feel slightly hollow, like she's starving and dust is all that's sustaining her. She longs to curl her fingers around his arm and lay her head on his chest. She needs to know if he still smells like him, if he's really the same man, even without all the chaos and time and infinity coating his skin. She wants things she can't possibly have, and it reminds her that love is a drug. When taken together, it is a cure. But taken alone, it may as well be poison.

The urge to leave makes her bones itch. The universe must take pity on her, because her phone
breaks the silence with an abrupt buzz. She knows who it will be before she glances at the screen, but she makes a show of looking anyway. Her suspicions are confirmed when Jack's number pops on the screen, and River has never been more grateful for an alien invasion. Already backing toward the door, she glances up and announces, "I have to go."

"Will you be back?" He steps toward her like she's yanked him closer by some invisible string, his voice high and wobbly like it always is when he's equal parts hopeful and nervous. He must sense her reluctance, because he jumps to speak before she can. "Actually, don't answer. Let the eight ball decide. Maybe it'll finally bring me some good luck."

Before River can protest, he's scooping it off the shelf and tossing it to her a final time. Catching it effortlessly, a frown creases her brow. "I thought you said the till was broken."

He waves her concerns away before stuffing his hands into his pockets. "Don't need a till for gifts."

River's features soften into a tired smile as she breathes, "Thank you."

Drinking in the sight of the man that's almost her husband, River turns on a dime, heading for the door before she changes her mind or does something incredibly stupid. It's an easy escape, the coward's way out, but her heart is pounding and her son is kicking away at her insides so she may as well be running too.

As she turns, her eyes scan across the TARDIS, stealing one last glance at the ship she calls mother. A coat that wasn't there before is draped across the coat rack. The brown leather has seen better days, and it's suddenly clear why the customer from before is a regular here. The patron in question is nowhere to be found, but in her haste, River pays the observation little mind, focusing instead on the freedom that lies just beyond the TARDIS doors.

Eager fingers close around the handle, pushing it open as she steps over the threshold. Daylight hits her, but it doesn't burn nearly so much as the feel of his eyes on her through the window. She doesn't stop or turn, refusing to look back as she makes her exit. The baby kicks again, and River makes an effort to slow her pounding hearts.

He told her to avoid contact because it would be dangerous. But the label of dangerous has always been far more inviting than it was foreboding. Risks she can handle, but she never stopped to consider how much speaking to him would hurt. So close and out of reach. It wasn't like when she was a ghost, when he looked right through her but still knew every word of their story. This time, she was as much a stranger to him as she had been in The Library, a pain she survived, more or less. She's looked into the eyes of Doctors that didn't know her before. But it wasn't like this. It wasn't these eyes, the ones she grew to love most. The one she married and murdered and fell in love with all over again. He saw her this time. The trouble is, he looked into her eyes and saw nothing. He couldn't read her mind with a single glance. He couldn't finish her thoughts before they'd even fully formed. He didn't know to catch her because he couldn't tell she was falling.

She understands now why he couldn't speak to her ghost, why almost getting her back just wasn't enough. Why being near her was a necessity but speaking to her hurt. She wishes she could go back to how it was, back to watching from afar and going unnoticed. But the wall is broken now, and there's no going back.

She lets out a long sigh, speaking to herself as she says, "What am I supposed to do now?" The eight ball is heavy in her hand, and she turns it over, finding yet another noncommittal response floating in blue gel. 'Try again later' bobs innocently inside the toy, and River stuffs it into her bag, wishing that for once in her life, something would come with a straight answer.
In want of a distraction, she pulls out her phone to call Jack and see what alien incursion awaits her today. He answers immediately, a flourish to his voice as he chirps, "Beenudian street slugs, ugly bastards but relatively harmless as long as you don't have skin to skin contact with them."

"I love a science lesson as much as the next girl, but is there any reason you're telling me this?"

"We found more of your handiwork," he offers breezily. "I wasn't going to mention it because I know how stubborn you can be. But cleaning up these guys is more trouble than they're worth. If you need to shoot something, stick to the weevils next time."

She's only half-listening, phone pinned between her cheek and her shoulder as her feet guide her toward her bus stop. "Jack, darling, what are you on about? What handiwork?"

"Your nightly excursions. It's impressive, especially given your condition."

"As much as I'd love to take the credit, it wasn't me. Probably just a local that took a wrong turn and got lucky." Her voice is light and dismissive, and Jack's silence hangs between them, the calm before a storm.

"Are you certain?" he finally prompts, a thin veil of nonchalance hiding a grave edge to his question. "You haven't been sleep-assassinating anything?"

River's pace slows, concern demanding she press the phone to her ear properly. "Not in a few decades. Why?"

"The slug has blaster burns that are easily three centuries out. We've been finding the bodies of extraterrestrials all over the city for weeks."

River stops in her tracks, eyes narrowing with enough irritation she's certain Jack can feel it from across the city. "Are you telling me there's someone out there hunting aliens, and you never thought to mention it?!"

"We thought it was you!" he protests. "They've all been hostile specimens up until now. Weevil activity is at an all-time low."

River hums as she drinks in the information. "I wonder if it's premeditated," she theorizes. "If someone got their hands on a gun and thought they'd clean up the streets."

"And that's a bad thing?"

River shrugs, suspicious eyes already scanning the seemingly innocent stretch of road. "Maybe they got a taste for it."

"You're saying we've got a good samaritan gone serial killer?"

"I'm saying we shouldn't rule anything out. If they have sophisticated weapons, they might not just be getting lucky. They might be tracking their prey via temporal energy signatures."

"So we'll do the same," Jack offers easily. "Monitor the high-rift activity areas and tag anything with temporal feedback. The best way to find a predator is to track the prey."

The hair on River's neck prickles, unease swimming in her veins as she allows her eyes to drift toward the TARDIS, toward the floppy haired shopkeeper that was once the most feared man in the universe, toward the god that turned himself mortal all for the sake of a child he's yet to know.
"You and the team shepherd anything that falls through the rift," River instructs. "There's a rather specific lamb I need to keep safe from the slaughter."
Taking a long, hard look at her reflection, River lets out a sigh. For her, espionage and seduction have always gone hand in hand, both art forms that seemed infinitely easier when she wasn't smuggling a watermelon. But Jack was right; the only way to protect the Doctor was to gain his trust. And if he was going to let anyone get close to him, it was her.

"What, in the end, are any of us looking for? We’re looking for someone who’s looking for us." - Twelfth Doctor

Taking a long, hard look at her reflection, River lets out a sigh. For her, espionage and seduction have always gone hand in hand, both art forms that seemed infinitely easier when she wasn't smuggling a watermelon. But Jack was right; the only way to protect the Doctor was to gain his trust. And if he was going to let anyone get close to him, it was her.

"How do I look, Ethan?"

The machine blinks at her, a calculating tilt to its rectangular head. "Suitable for a humanoid female of indeterminate age."

"Flattery will get your everywhere," River retorts, but her teasing tone is lost on her vacuum with a voice box. Turning back to her mirror, River takes in her appearance with resigned satisfaction. They aren't the curves she's used to, not the ones he followed into war zones or tripped over himself to get to any time she wore a corset. Her hips don't sway quite the same as they once did and there's exhaustion behind her come-hither eyes. Even her hair has betrayed her, having become thicker and more unmanageable than ever before.

River does her best to remind herself that it wasn't her waistline that made the Doctor fall for her. They loved one another like the Earth does the sun, through solar storms and eons, with gravity that can't be explained and devotion that can't be compared. He loved her for her warmth and her rage and the light she poured into the darkness. Even as she repeats the promise of always in her mind like mantra, River still gravitates toward her most dangerous shade of lipstick. It isn't the poison that once adorned her lips like a honey trap. Now it's her armor, as red as the blood in her veins, and, like any good soldier, she never goes to war without it.

"Professor, may I make an inquiry?"

"You just did," River jests, fluffing her hair as she smirks at the android in the mirror.

The machine behind her has yet to master any form of wit, and after a moment of electronic whirring, he finally processes her remark. "May I make another?"
"Go on, then," River exhales, granting the poor dear a reprieve as she sets her sights on her shoes. His binocular-like eyes follow her across the room, its dry, computer-animated voice not exactly the soundtrack she hoped for before a night of courting. "From my understanding of human social customs, the amount of breast tissue you have on display indicates a desire to mate."

River glances down at her cleavage. The dress did showcase a rather generous amount of her bosom, but they were one of the few perks of pregnancy, and it would be a shame not to utilize them. Unrepentant in the use of her womanly wiles, River humors his curiosity. "What's your question, dear?"

"What is the purpose of mating if one is already infected with a parasite?"

"The polite term is 'baby',' River informs him, testing out her favorite pair of heels before ultimately deciding to trade her treacherously high shoes for something a bit more practical. Her back hurts enough as it is. "And humans don't only mate for procreational purposes."

"What other purposes are there?" Ethan's monotone voice queries, and River glances toward him, flashing a shameless grin.

"It's fun."

Once again, her brazen humor goes unappreciated, and if androids could feel disgust, she's certain Ethan would short circuit from it. "How primitive."

"Indeed." River hums, slipping on flats and getting to her feet.

"Permission to suggest an alternate course of action?"

"Permission denied."

"Permission to remind you of optimal sleep requirements for third trimester human pregnancy?"

"Permission also denied." His gears churn in an unpleasant way, but River pays his protest no mind, grabbing her handbag and filling it with all the essentials a girl could need: lipstick, gun, and a mobile. "Don't wait up."

Gathering her coat, she heads for the door. As she makes her exit, her flats tap against the stairs. It's not the battle cry she's used to, not as empowering as the clicking of her heels. But it feels good to be back to a semblance of her old life, to be going somewhere besides the shop. Souls like hers weren't meant to be idle. Every step downward puts her closer to her goal, and River steels herself for what she'll have to do. She has a mission in mind and determination in her veins, and it reminds her that she's never needed weapons. Force of will is all women like her require to be dangerous.

Tonight her sights are set on the Doctor. She tries to put aside her personal feelings, to slip inside the psychopath skin she once wore so well. It's been a lifetime since he was the subject of her skills, since she thought of him as a target, as a task to be completed. River does her best to convince herself that's what she'll be now, just a vessel with a purpose, that just being his friend is enough, that it's all she needs to be to keep him safe. He doesn't have to fall in love. He doesn't even have to trust her. He simply has to let her in, just enough for her to keep the monsters at bay.

Maybe then, when he's back to being himself, he won't feel so betrayed. It's not like she wanted to go back on her word, like she hoped trouble would find them. She resisted temptation as long as she could, and even now that the dam is broken, she's only seeing him again because she has to. He wasn't safe on his own, not with an alien hunter lurking the streets of Cardiff. Besides, River's
always made it her job to save him from himself, to reel him in when he's too stupid to run away or too blind to see the danger that's right in front of him. Now was no exception.

Even as she justifies her actions, guilt has begun to creep into her bones. It's easier to ignore than she expected. The feeling wasn't exactly a foreign one. It was a penance they both paid in their back-to-front love affair. It followed them like a dull ache, like a soreness in a muscle that's been overused. At times, she almost welcomed the burn. The pain meant that there was still room to grow, still versions of him to see, still secrets to learn. This ache isn't much different. It still feels like stealing and she is ever the eager thief.

Jack and his team have only aided in her addiction, keeping tabs on him in her absence and informing her of his whereabouts. Tonight finds him at a local pub, which had been a rather curious turn of events until a bit of research informed her of the pub quiz said establishment hosts every Wednesday night. Her hubby never could resist an opportunity to show off. Neither could she, if she's honest, and her only regret is that her haste to be rid of Ethan means she won't be fashionably late. The streets are as busy as she expected them to be on a Wednesday night, speckled with only a few couples here and there, hurrying along to their dinner reservations. The crowd grows thicker the closer she gets to her destination, the masses flocking toward the venue.

It doesn't look like much from the outside, though she's certainly been to worse, been thrown out of worse if she's honest. It doesn't appear she fits in with this lot any better because the younger and older crowd alike toss her rounded stomach a few sideways glances as she enters the building. The inside of the pub doesn't prove any more inviting than the exterior. It's humble in appearance, the old-fashioned decorum making it a beacon for old souls. Dim lighting does little to hide decade-old paint chipping off even more ancient walls. Guests of ages fill tables that seem better suited for a game of Bridge than they do occupying today's youth. Underneath the roar of voices, a thump of music can be heard. It's heavy with bass and just out of touch enough to indicate it isn't a permanent part of the decorum or the choice of the regular clientele. No one seems to mind though, too wrapped up in their own liquor-coated conversations.

River's eyes scan the room for one man in particular. She spots the neon swirly straw first, its owner behind it, tucked safely in a booth near the back of the building. Eyes narrowing, she straightens her shoulders and makes her way toward him, passing through the crowd like a lioness through tall grass. It's only when a path clears halfway across the room that she sees it. Or rather, her. There's a woman by his side, young with dark hair and fair skin. They're speaking animatedly, a respectable distance between them, but River can't help but notice the warmth in the Doctor's eyes as the girl throws her head back and laughs. River's feet slow to a stop, alarm bells in her blood telling her to turn and run. And she's about to concede, to disappear back into the crowd, to rethink every plan she's ever had because clearly this was a terrible, foolish, awful idea.

But then he turns his head, gaze drifting out into the crowd as if lulled by some otherworldly force, drawn like the sunset to the western skyline. Their eyes meet, and before River can dodge his glance or look away. He sits a little straighter in his seat, a hint of a smile splitting his cheeks as he waves her over. Despite the urge to run, River forces her feet forward. Every step feels like a blatant betrayal of her instincts, and yet the gap between them continues to close. As River approaches the secluded booth, the girl’s eyes wash over her, wide and unpleasantly surprised. The Doctor doesn't notice, too busy straitening his bow tie as he beams. "Fancy seeing you here!"

Eyes briefly skirting over the girl, River's focus stills on the Doctor. "I was in the neighborhood."

"Sit, sit!" He budges over, making room on the worn seat.

"I don't want to interrupt," River hesitates, glancing at the woman to his right.
"Nonsense! More the merrier, right, Maddie?" he cheers, and the girl at his side gives a tight-lipped smile, nodding.

River glances between the two, quietly analyzing. The girl won't meet her eyes, significantly more uncomfortable than she was a moment ago. Her bright smile has contorted into a grimace, the flush of her merry cheeks has gone pale, joy replaced by discomfort.

A warning River can't explain pricks on the back of her neck. Her self-preservation begs her to run, but the predator inside her refuses to turn her back. Calculating eyes can't ignore the way the girl's hands have hidden themselves beneath the table or that her posture now shifts away when a moment ago it was relaxed and inviting.

The Doctor, on the other hand, remains oblivious, smilingly brightly as he tempts River into joining them. "Go on, drinks are on me."

"In that case," River breathes, surrendering to him and her suspicious tendencies. "How's a girl to resist?"

She slides into the booth, maintaining an impressive level of grace for a woman in her third trimester. The Doctor brings his hands together for a celebratory clap, nudging the dejected girl beside him as he gestures toward River. "We have history."

The girl nearly chokes on her drink. River is equally surprised, brow pinched in curiosity as she questions, "Sorry?"

The Doctor's eyes go back to River. "History, you're good at it, yes? I'm science. Maddie has pop culture covered, but we always make a right mess of historical trivia. We might stand a chance at winning now that you're here."

"Oh, yes. I believe I can manage," River quips, tampering a smirk before glancing to the girl at his side. "Maddie, was it?"

"Oh! Right, sorry," the Doctor interjects. "This is my assistant, Maddie. Maddie, this is River."

Gaze now freely allowed to roam, River takes the half second to study the girl. Her long hair is pulled back, revealing a shapely face and porcelain skin. Her clothing is dark and inconspicuous, and as River's eyes wander, they catch sight of a jacket, worn and brown, and- oh. She's going to kill Jack for talking her into this.

"Hello," the girl mutters, attention drifting ever-so-briefly in River's direction before straying away.

"We met the other day," the Doctor babbles on. "Told me some rather fascinating things about world leaders. Did you know Rasputin died of hypothermia?"

"Can't say I did," the girl confesses, still taking great interest in the surroundings.

"Love a bit of trivia, me," the Doctor continues, oblivious to the tension rolling off his assistant in waves. "Shame they only host these things in pubs."

"I know what you mean," River hums. "I was on the receiving end of a few curious stares when I came in."

"I didn't know they allowed pregnant women into pubs." Maddie mutters into a dark glass, looking anywhere but at River.
"There seems to be a lot you don't know. You sure you're here for the pub quiz?" River flashes her a loaded smirk, and the girl finally stares back, stunned.

Lost for words, or possibly just above being baited, the young girl stands, announcing, "I’m getting another drink before we start. More fizz?"

Her offer is directed to the Doctor. He nods and before she can completely vacate the booth, River adds, "I'll have a sparkling water, if you don't mind, dear."

To River's surprise, there's no protest on her tongue. The girl simply gives a stiff nod before turning and making her way to the bar. Old instincts never really fade, because River makes a mental note not to let the beverage touch her lips. As Maddie turns to leave, River watches her go. Her attire is simple and unassuming, but the girl has legs for days and the bone structure of a Greek goddess. Human or no, the Doctor always did have a knack for finding pretty girls. Suddenly River’s half-hearted attempt at seduction feels rather lacking.

"I guess it brought me some luck after all," the Doctor speaks first, breaking the silence and stealing River’s focus.

River pivots in her seat, her attentions now belonging solely to him. "What did?"

"The eight ball," he grins. "How else would I be fortunate enough to see you twice in the same day?"

River laughs, a little forced as she agrees, "Must be fate. Do you come here often?"

"Only on Wednesdays," he says slurping up a generous amount of soda and gulping it down. She watches his throat as he swallows, eyes stalling on his bow tie. It's crooked and everything within her demands to reach out and straighten the fabric. Somehow, she finds the will to refrain. He doesn't know her yet and intimacies have always spooked her doe-eyed Doctor. "Maddie got me hooked, oh, about a month ago."

All thoughts of temptation flood her mind in an instant, the timestamp nearly making her head spin. How has she not noticed someone else coming and going out of the shop?

However, River doesn't have time to reflect on her shortcomings because in the next breath he's asking, "Haven't seen you here before. What's the occasion?"

His hands won't be still, tapping against the wooden table the way they do when he challenges her to a game of chess. He's testing her, learning her, readying to label her, pawn or queen. River's predator eyes answer his unspoken question, making no secret of scanning down his body. Mischievous and determined, her focus stills on his beverage as a knowing smile takes hold of her mouth. Leaning forward and folding her arms across the table, River coos, "Maybe I came for the swirly straws."

His anxious fingers still, a crooked smirk stealing the corner of his cheek. "They do give it extra fizz."

Interpreting his words as invitation, River's fingers snake around the rim of his glass, pulling it toward her to take a slow, contemplative sip.

"Well?" he asks, thin brow quirked and expectant eyes locked on her.

River shrugs, passing the beverage back. "Needs whiskey."

He huffs out a laugh, fingertips making designs out of the moisture the glass left behind. "You'll
wanna watch the barman, or you might get your wish. He keeps trying to put liquor in my cream soda."

"Well, I promise not to take advantage of you if someone spikes your drink." The smirk on her face is a mirror of his, and if anything, the wicked gleam in her eye only makes him shift closer. Truth be told, she's hardly playing fair, not that he ever did when she was too young to know he knew her like a sailor knows the stars.

He would swear up and down that he could tell her age by the cadence of her footsteps. It wasn't until she was older that she understood how such intimacies could be true, until she could date him like she dates stones and ruins. She places his time by the cracks in his skin he doesn't think she notices, by his worn exterior and fragile touches. When his eyes are old and his smile weary, when he is battered but strong, he is the ancient Asgardian cliffs of Granite. Some days he is vibrant and young and full of life, so much light shining in his eyes he is the birth of the first star in all the galaxies. His inner anger looks like the dawn of creation, the bubbling of magma, ancient and dangerous and entrancing. When he's nervous, he is the babble of brooks in the Forrest of Forgotten Realms. He is shy like the slow peaking of stars on the lonely Ice Moons. Some days he is as patient as the Infinity Streams that flow and flow and flow, hoping to find the sea. Lust is the reflection of two binary stars on a slow, imminent collision, eyes dark with need as gold sparks around pools of black.

Once or twice he is the burning of Alexandria or the fall of Troy or the crucifixion of Christ. He is loss of knowledge, of trust, of faith. More than he'd like to admit, he is fury. He is the rage at the heart of all stars, all chaos and destruction because it knows no other way. His sadness is the planet of which they never learned the name, the place forgotten to time, where they found themselves when he lost one too many lives.

His face is a map of all of time and space, a spectrum of all that ever was or will be. Today he is content. He is at peace holding her hand. He is a hot beverage on a cold day. He is subtle smiles and tender touches. He is warm sun and freshly-powdered snow. He laughs and she hears the sound of skates gliding on ice. The sweet nostalgia in his eyes as clear as the old London skyline. He is unabashed in the way he kisses the tip of her nose, her warm breath ghosting over his rosy cheeks. He is glowing like the frozen, icy Thames. River reaches for her diary, opening it to a page just left of the middle and writes, London 1814- he is loved.

Here, in the dim lighting and ambient noise, he looks less like a fixed event and more like his former self, the blush to his cheeks as red as his tacky, colorful suit. She remembers all his smiles, but his sixth self may be one of her favorites, smitten and starry-eyed from the moment she said hello. In the here and now, the man beside her slurps down the last of his drink through his brightly-colored straw, wincing when the cold burns its way down his throat. The sight of it is enough to make her laugh. Just being around him is a natural high. Something about him never fails to make her feel lighter, warmer, invincible.

The moment of reverie is broken as three beverages clink together, announcing Maddie's return. She places them in the center of the table, and River watches as the beautiful girl takes her seat on the other side of the booth. That invincible glow inside her fractures, reminding her that love really is the cruelest of warfares, the most dangerous of drugs.

The Doctor reaches for his fresh beverage, but before he can fill the silence with small talk, feedback whines through the loudspeakers of the pub. All eyes drawn to the front of the building, an older gentleman that must be the owner takes to a small, makeshift stage, microphone in hand. A decidedly Welsh voice hushes the crowd and the Doctor springs to life, declaring himself team leader. Removing a piece of paper and a pencil from his top pocket, he twirls the writing device between his
The quizmaster is gruff and to the point, providing no ado whatsoever as he clears his throat and begrudgingly begins. "Question one: Which famous astronaut once said 'That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind'?"

River smirks, parting her lips to speak, when-

"Neil Armstrong. Easy." Maddie whispers conspiratorially. The Doctor purses his lips, impressed as he jots the answer down.

River's mirth has vanished, replaced by the sour feeling that her memories have been intruded upon. Fizzy straws and quaint establishments and space suits from the 1960s belonged to her. Secrets and space and lost orphans were pages in her diary. Whether he knew it or not, flirting in poorly-lit rooms with danger on their heels and history at their fingertips were days that belong to herself and the Doctor, not this girl he barely knows.

But the quizmaster cares not for River's woes, already filling the dingy pub with the next question. "Question two: Which animal is owned by the Chinese government?"

"Panda," River announces, firmly but quietly, before the quizmaster can even finish his exhale. And when her sweetie flashes her those eyes she loves so much, the ones that are equal parts fascinated and flummoxed, she can't resist explaining, "They used to be given as gifts as a gesture of good will, a practice that dates back to the Tang Dynasty. But pandas are nearly extinct now, and thanks to capitalism, they're only given as loans."

The Doctor soaks in the knowledge, a slave to the sound of her voice, equal parts hungry and intrigued as his body gravitates closer to hers. "Are endangered species another hobby of yours?"

"Oh," River assures him, tone low and full of secrets, "I'm a woman of many talents."

He bites back a grin at that, teeth sinking ever-so-slightly into the corner of his lip. It's a sight that makes her insides tingle, that makes her think of beaches and angels and fairytales and can I trust you, River Song?

River can't say what it is that makes her eyes break from his, what unknown force demands she look away. But when her gaze drifts toward Maddie, River finds herself being openly studied by curious, calculating eyes. Discovered, Maddie quickly looks away, sitting back in her seat and fixing her attentions on the makeshift stage.

"Question three:" the quiz master begins again, his voice a distant murmur. "What sea-dwelling creature, phylum Cnidaria, will evaporate if left out in the sun too long?"

River isn't listening, far too busy scrutinizing the girl before her. She's hard to read, this one, giving away nothing, her only tells a clenched jaw and distant eyes. River's focus lingers on tense shoulders and carefully hidden hands, determined to find the source of her discomfort when a sudden outburst from the Doctor's demands her attention.

"Jellyfish!" he declares, a little louder than necessary, pleased to finally be useful. His eyes gravitate to River, subconsciously seeking approval. Remembering why she's here, River grants it in the form of parting lips and green eyes that drag from his mouth down to the pencil clutched in his hand. He shivers a bit under her blatant staring, his free hand lifting to tug at his bow tie. There are words, something daring and flirtatious brewing behind his lips and he's about to bless her with them when-

"Question four: A-R-U-S-S-U-T can be unscrambled to form what type of cloud?"
All mischievous thoughts have been pushed to the back of his mind, replaced by the newest puzzle. River mourns her losses, watching as her teammates contemplate. It's getting harder for her to focus, a nagging in her bones telling her that something just isn't right. She seems to be the only one plagued with discomfort, though, because, as if bound by the same train of thought, the Doctor and his newest assistant lock eyes.

"Stratus!" they blurt out, grinning like co-conspirators. They celebrate their victory with a high five, and River stares on, an uneasiness churning in her gut, alongside the distinct feeling that, perhaps, she's the intruder here.

Outside the bubble of her thoughts, the quizmaster lifts the microphone again. River means to listen, she really does, but her phone buzzes in her pocket, stealing her attentions. Looking at her lap, where she's keeping her mobile discreetly beneath the table, she finds a message from Jack.

Massive surge in rift activity. I'll keep you updated.

Moments later, an unfamiliar chirp mingles with the dull roar of voices and music. River glances up to see Maddie going for her phone. Her face is blank, a map she can't read. Maybe it's a coincidence. Maybe it's nothing. Then again, if River was going to set a trap for the Doctor, that's exactly the jumper she'd put it in.

It was never going to be a gun for you, Doctor.

"Any ideas, ladies?"

The Doctor's voice grounds her, and River blinks at him in confusion. "Sorry, what?"

"Screwdrivers, how do you make them?" he asks again, looking between the two women. Both caught off guard, River meets eyes with Maddie over the table before the girl quickly looks away.

"With difficulty, probably," Maddie offers flippantly, gathering her things as she adds, "Something's come up. I have to go."

"We've only just started!" the Doctor protests.

Maddie dismisses him with a shake of her head and a smile that doesn't reach her eyes. "Rain check."

River watches her carefully, studying the girl's sudden change as she stands and slips her coat over her shoulders. It's hard to see much detail in the dim lighting and her clothes are too baggy to notice the lines of anything concealed.

"See you in the morning, John," Maddie bids farewell, glancing briefly in River's direction but not quite meeting her eyes as she forces out, "River," before disappearing into the crowd.

"Wonder what that was about," the Doctor ponders aloud, a worried pout turning his cheek downward.

"Probably nothing," River assures him, watching the path the girl had taken through the crowd. She'd be a liar if she said the uneasy ball coagulating in her chest didn't dissipate more and more with every step the girl took in the other direction. There was something off about her, something out of sync that she just didn't trust. Only serving to aid in her suspicions, the phone in River's lap buzzes again. Glancing down, she discovers another message from Jack, this one advising, Stray weevil not far from your location. Stay put.
"Shame," the Doctor frowns. "We were doing so well."

Remembering herself, River pastes a smile on her face and states, "You need vodka." His nonexistent brows climb his forehead as he turns to stare at her, so she clarifies, "To make a screwdriver," River continues, "you need vodka and orange juice."

It's hours before they leave. And it's only the bartender's not-so-subtle mopping beneath their feet that finally makes them notice the rest of the night owls have long since given up and left in search of a paracetamol and a warm bed. The Doctor insisted on walking her home, not that she put up much fuss, offering only half-hearted protests that she could handle herself. In her prison days, she had gotten rather good at keeping him at bay, at resisting his puppy-dog eyes every time he tempted her into traveling with him. But things were different now. She didn't have a sentence to serve or younger versions of him to meet. The only constant seems to be her promise to stay away, the one impossible thing he asked of her that she could never quite manage.

Call her selfish, but she's missed him, his awful jokes and flailing limbs and hazel eyes that have always managed to melt her insides. He's always been a romantic at heart, and nights like tonight only fuel his fanciful tendencies. The moon is full and the breeze has mellowed into something pleasant. Fairy lights twinkle in the trees and shadows dance across cobblestone streets. It's the kind of darkness they should have had upon first meeting, the kind of shadows that chase them around street lamps rather than through a paperback forest. They deserved brisk, fresh air that smells like the blossoming of something new. Not musty, dust-covered shelves and fresh corpses robbed of flesh.

He keeps pace beside her, happy, eager, curious, and not at full of distrust or dread or fear. It feels like a salve, like the meeting they should have had in a fair universe, their past safely behind her locked lips and thoughts of the future sparking like lightning in his eyes. She thinks of all the hims she knows, of celery boutonnières and oversized scarves and colorful suits. Truth be told, she's had lots of perfect meetings. Fate would just have it that he never got to remember any of them.

The man beside her now is adorned with an eccentricity of his own. A trophy in the form of a pint-shaped badge is pinned to the lapel of his jacket. It's somewhat comforting to know that, deep down, he's still him. You could take the Time Lord right out of the man, but there was no making him any less alien.

"I think I'll display it in my shop," he announces proudly, puffing his chest out like a peacock.

River laughs, shaking her head. "You're acting like you've never won anything before.

"I haven't," he chuckles, and River sobers.

"What do you mean?"

"I don't get out much," he shrugs. "Never went much of anywhere until Maddie came along." Then his face frowns, "Shame she had to leave early."

A noncommittal hum reverberates in River’s throat. "Tell me more about this Maddie," she segues, telling herself the prying question is purely for research. "How long have you known each other?"

"She started just over a month ago, I'd say. I didn't really need an assistant, but she needed a job and I hate paperwork."

His answer is flippant and River tames her voice, giving away nothing as she asks, "Not a girlfriend, then?"
"Maddie?" he nearly chokes on the name, a laugh in his throat as he assures, "No, no, no. She just does the books, cleans the windows, that sort of thing."

A knot she’d since lost notice of releases its hold on her hearts, any hints of jealousy expelled from her lungs in a heavy exhale. He’s the Doctor; he’s always craved company. Be it pretty girls or robot dogs or cyber heads, they're all the same to him. It's comforting to know that he got himself an Ethan. His just looks better in a skirt.

"So what about you?" His voice pierces the air, curious and sharp, sending a defensive prickle crawling up River's spine.

"What about me?" she breathes, scattering the words like eggshells.

But the Doctor has never been one to tread lightly, awakening every thought she's been trying to suppress as he casually asks, "Is there a husband to go along with that bump?"

"Sort of." She's quiet when she answers. And as the silence that follows stretches on, she begins to wonder if he even heard her at all. She certainly hopes so, because she isn't certain she'll be brave enough to admit it twice.

"Where is he?" The question is curious and tender and it may as well be a knife to her heart.

"I can't say," River forces out through burning lungs.

"As in you don't know or you're not at liberty?" he pries, a playful inflection curving his puzzled lips into a smile. "Is he in MI6 or witness protection or something?"

"Or something," is all the answer River gives, coy and enigmatic. His hazel eyes narrow like he's trying to see through her disguise, lips slightly parted like her secrets are something he can taste on the air. He loves the mystery, the puzzle of her. He always has.

Taking a deep, surrendering breath in through his nose, the Doctor shrugs. "Sounds complicated."

"Isn't it always?" River asks, a chuckle in her tone.

It's quiet for a minute, and she's certain her question will remain rhetorical. Making the most of the silence, she takes the opportunity to observe him, more intrigued by the man at her side than she is the one she's supposedly honeymooning with in the nearby tree. It's another life she doesn't know or remember, a story. But the floppy-haired man beside her is real, the raw emotion on his face more beautiful than the endless stars above them. And when he finally breaks the silence, he paints a picture more pure than the placid water at her feet. He uses descriptions like patient and kind and funny and fierce. He never mentions a face, never gives a name, and it makes her surrender to his story all the more. Because that's what love is, isn't it? It's not a title or perfectly-sculpted cheek bones. Love is one soul longing for another, a heartbeat in sync with your own.

She almost doesn't dig deeper, for fear of intruding, for listening to secrets not meant for her ears. But curiosity has always ruled her tongue. "What was the problem?"

It's his answer that quells her worries, so ready and willing to spill confessions like an overly ripe thundercloud biding its time for rain.

"Never could get the timing quite right," he explains, eyes locked on his shoes before sighing and shifting his gaze skyward. River follows in his lead. He's usually easy to read but his walls are up
now, eyes fixed on the stars, flicking from one to another, looking at nothing in particular. There's longing carved into the creases around his eyes, the same melancholy nostalgia one gets when looking at old photographs or drives past their childhood home. He's chasing a feeling that can't be caught, searching for something that can't be found. It's then that it occurs to her that he's looking for the love he spoke of, this nameless woman that got away. It isn't until his eyes stray to the tree, to the life she can't remember living, to the her she can't remember being, that she starts to wonder...

Maybe there's an explanation for why he hasn't looked at her, why he'll only make eye contact with her reflection, why he gives his coat without question but flinches whenever their knees brush.

When she finally speaks, River's voice is barely above a whisper, but she has to know, has to ask, if only to hear him say it. "Did you love her?"

"Still do." He answers with unwavering confidence. River stares at his profile with the same determined eyes he refuses to turn on her. There's hope in the curl of his lips and regret in his clenched jaw. Something desperate in the way his fingers hold tight to the top of his ship, like he doesn't trust where his hands would stray to, a longing in the way his body leans toward hers despite the still waters, and suddenly the gravity around her shifts. The Doctor, John, the man who came for her in the hospital, the one she can't remember, the one helping her find her way home, has been looking for her all along. "Never really told her how much, though," he adds, and she's staring to think he really doesn't have to.

A gust of wind blows through the street, playing with her curls. She's almost home now, and River finds her pace slowing, doing her best to convince herself it's purely because of the cold.

"Where do you live exactly?" the man beside her asks. "I've just been walking aimlessly."

"Just around the corner," River informs, nodding toward the road up ahead on the right.

The Doctor turns to look at her, puzzled. "But you take the night bus on my street," he states quizzically. "The next stop over is much quicker."

One shoulder giving a shrug. River offers him the only truth she can. "I like the view."

"They're exactly the same," a bewildered chuckle falling from his crooked smile.

River twists, looking up at him through batting lashes that are determined to ward off the chill in the air as adamantly as they hide the warmth in her gaze. Nevertheless, there's no taming her voice, no disguising the vulnerability in the way she whispers, "Not exactly."

Her eyes reach for him the way her fingers close around his wrist, guiding his palm to the ancient wooden frame. "I am telling you."

When her meaning finally sinks in, realization writes itself across his face like a neon sign. Flushing a bit, he turns his attention to his shoes, a hand coming up to rub at the back of his neck. River worries she's said too much, given away the game too soon, but then a smirk quirks his lips as he says, "Not such a coincidence I ran into you tonight then, is it?"

An indignant brow crawls up her forehead, the softness in her tone replaced by a playful challenge. "Are you suggesting I'm stalking you?"

"It's not stalking if I'm happy to see you," he counters, a grin just begging to crack those boyish cheeks.
"It is if the stalker is good," she parries, voice dropping low as she flashes a devilishly inviting simper. "And for the record, I am very, very good."

A buzzing in her handbag shatters the moment between them. With an apologetic smile, River stills, digging through her bag. Fingers closing around her mobile, River stares down at her screen and sighs.

"Who is it?" The footprint of her husband asks, not so subtly trying to steal a glance at her caller ID.

"It's nothing," she says, silencing Jack's call and tucking the mobile away. He could handle a few weevils on his own for one night. "Just work."

"Oh?" He tilts his head, interest peaked. "Where do you work?"

"The tourist information center." She lies with an ease that would make a seasoned politician envious, so used to dancing around the truth that things like remorse don't even touch her anymore. Which is why the look on the Doctor’s face isn't one she expected to see.

His brow is furrowed, lips pursed, surprise coating his words as he says, "It's nearly three am."

"Well, you know Cardiff," River breathes out, offering him a coquettish smile. "The city never sleeps."

A twitch to his cheeks, the Doctor shakes his head and looks away. "I guess you just don't seem the type."

"Don't I?" It's a challenge and secret hope that he'll see the truth behind her half-hearted lies.

Before the doubts can seed behind those chocolate eyes, River's phone buzzes once again, somehow managing to sound even more impatient. She ignores the persistent summons, but the moment is broken, her fears crashing down on her when the man before her sighs through his nose, tucking his hands in his pockets. "Maybe you should answer."

"They can do without me for another ten minutes."

"And neglect a potential sightseeing emergency?" he teases. "Aren't you a naughty one?"

"You have no idea," River purrs in a voice that's all invitation.

He chuckles and it's only when their eyes meet that she realizes they never started walking again. He rocks on his heels like he always does when he's waiting for something, and every instinct she has begs her to grab him by the collar and show him what he's missing. Her fingers flex in the night air, focusing on his lips. The desire inside her dies at the sight of his frown, her gaze crawling up his face to discover he's looking over her shoulder.

"Do you know him?" the Doctor asks, and River turns to see a man racing towards them, a long coat flapping in the wind, arms waving frantically.

"Jack?" she breathes, and he's shouting something she can't quite hear, just one word on his lips, something simple and urgent that looks an awful lot like-

Run
All her questions are answered when a snarl rumbles out of a side street. River's attentions snap toward the sound in time to see her husband taking a step forward. It all happens in the blink of an eye. River reaching for her gun. The Doctor stepping toward the shadows. A creature leaping forward and she's pulling the trigger before it even takes shape in the moonlight. Her phaser fire strikes the creature in the shoulder, a flesh wound at best, but it grants the Doctor enough time to stumble back. He's looking at her with wild, terror-filled eyes, disbelief written across that baby face. But River doesn't have time to console him because the beast has turned its eyes on her now. It's snarl looks more like a smile, and it's only when she hears a hyena-like cackle from the back of the alley that she realizes why. Two of its friends materialize from the dark. They prowl like dogs, but their bodies are covered in snakelike scales. Teeth like razors protrude from jaws as strong as bear traps. They're quick and organized, surrounding River and the Doctor like pack hunters. Her hearts have begun to race, but it isn't claws she feels at her back, it's her husband.

"What the hell are these things?" His voice is high and panicked and she tries not to notice how it's miles away from the excitement it ought to be.

"Trouble," she says curtly. "Stay behind me and try not to get eaten." She lets a few more shots off, doing her best to keep them all where she can see them.

"Why do you have a gun?" he squeaks, ducking. "And where were you keeping it??"

It sounds a little more like the man she loves so she can't help herself when she throws a smirk over her shoulder. "If we live through this, maybe I'll show you."

A string of rapid fire that isn't hers hits the monsters. For a brief moment, they scatter. The small split grants Jack enough passage to get through, coming to their aid and standing at her side.

"Took you long enough, Harkness!" River snaps.

But Jack is having none of it, a dagger in is tone as he quips, "Yeah, yeah. Learn to answer a phone!"

"Excuse me for thinking you could do your job."

He doesn't get a chance to retort because two of the monsters pounce in unison. River and Jack take aim at the same beast, and it's dead before it even touches the ground. But the second is quicker, dodging the shot and swiping at Jack, trying to make them disperse. But River knows better, and she takes a protective step in front of Doctor, pinning him between herself and Jack.

"The third one went back into the shadows," he whispers into her hair, and there was a time that low tone mixed with the threat of danger would have made her insides coil. "Think you scared it off?"

"Not likely." Gun stretched out before her, River scans the darkened streets for the beast she wounded, finding nothing. It can't have gone far because it's friend is still drawing Jack's attention, tap dancing around phaser fire. Her own weapon is fully charged, heavy in her hand as she flips the safety off and disables the stun. Her free hand dangles at her side and slender fingers wrap around her wrist, sliding down to her palm and entwining with her own. Her pulse is thundering in her ears and her son is kicking away at her insides and a husband that doesn't know her is clutching her like a lifeline and everything feels a bit fuzzy and far away when a subtle movement twitches in the corner of her eye.

"Did you-?" the Doctor whispers, and River cuts him off, all too aware of his breath on her neck.

"Yes, I saw it," she breathes, forcing herself to focus.
"What's it doing?"

"Looking for weak spots. It wants to split us up."

He's quiet for a moment and she can feel his brain racing, operating on a frequency she can no longer hear. "And what are we doing?"

"Waiting for it to show its face."

"A stand off, then," he surmises. "How good are you with that gun?"

"Very," River snorts. "Don't worry, I won't let the bad monster get you."

"I'm counting on it," the words fall out in huff that's more expectant than brave, and the next thing she knows, his fingers are slipping from hers.

"Sweetie, no!" Is all the warning she has time to shout. Without her permission, her eyes abandon the creature, turning to watch as the Doctor breaks formation and sprints down the road, offering himself up as a distraction in the form of the wounded gazelle. It's the snarl that follows that demands her attention because in the next moment, the beast is charging forward, barreling straight for him.

There's a frustrated scream on her lips as her meson bursts penetrate its reptilian scales. Shot after shot ricochets off its hide. It's flesh is smoking, but that hasn't slowed it down, and it's paws thump against the pavement, mere steps behind the Doctor's heels, and oh, he better survive this or she's going to kill him.

"The belly!" she hears Jack shout, the beast before him lifeless on the ground as he turns his attentions toward the one pursing the Doctor. "It's the only place they're vulnerable."

But they're sprinting away from her and even if it rears up, she can't get a clear shot. She needs to be in front of them and she can't outrun them on her own and if she doesn't do something now...

There's no time to for debate and before she knows it, River lunges for Jack, fingers closing on his wrist and the vortex manipulator he wears like a charm. Her expert hands don't give him time to question or complain, typing so quickly they're halfway down the road before he's even released the trigger. The teleportation energy crackles across her skin like an old friend, humming in her veins like a long-forgotten song.

They're a few yards ahead of the creature now, her lanky husband zigzagging across cobblestone streets. At her side, Jack sings his protests, but River doesn't hear them. All she knows is the weight of her gun and the man she loves and the monster that's coiling in preparation to pounce. Taking a deep breath in, River aims her gun and waits. It leaps into the air, and the moment it raises its paw to swipe, River seizes her chance, unloading her weapon at its highest setting. It strikes in the chest and the beast lets out a gurgling howl, body going limp as it flies through the air. Momentum from its own weight carries it forward, striking her husband in the back and sending them both careening onto the ground. Her gangly husband tumbles like a weed, his head slapping against the pavement in a way that turns her insides.

"Doctor!" she hears herself scream, feet already carrying her toward him.

He isn't moving, limbs spread out at unnatural angels, eyelids fallen shut, and all she can think about is the child inside her that's no longer kicking. Hand on her stomach, River takes a step toward the Doctor, unsure if she means to give help or ask for it as a crippling pain brings her to her knees.
A taste of truth

Chapter Summary

Looking at him now, it's easy to tell that he's resting far too peacefully to know the depths of her devotion, far too naïve to know that he could turn her whole world upside down with a single brush of his lips. Right now, he's blissfully unaware of prophecies and the danger that lies ahead, unburdened by the looming darkness in their future. He is unscarred by their ragged history and the rough terrain behind them.

Chapter Notes

Sorry this took a billion years. I won't waste time with excuses, but I'm back in the game now and determined to finish. Big thank you to those that came into my Tumblr ask box inquiring about this fic. Without you guys, I probably would have abandoned it.

As always, mad props to Cassie for the beta and for putting up with me.

"In a universe in which past, present, and future came into existence all at once, complete from beginning to end, with all possible outcomes of every life woven through the tapestry, there is no chance, only choice, no luck, but only consequences." - Dean Koontz

He's packing like he means to never come back, flying their ship like it's the last time he'll do so, as if he'll land and leave and never look back. He's stood toe-to-toe with demons and devils, danced with Death itself all the while keeping a smile on his face. He's taken on armies and starships and solar storms without batting an eye. It's only fitting that words would be what bring him to heel, that a grave warning from witches in red cloaks has put the Doctor's tail between his legs. There's an irony to it. How many times had River begged him to run and he never did? How many times did he stand his ground because he was too stupid or too brave to walk away? And now, when she feels it in her bones that fighting is the only way out, her Doctor's running scared.

Hands on her hips and eyes trained on her husband, River watches as the bravest man she's ever known stands ankle-deep in their wardrobe, preparing to flee. "You can't just leave the TARDIS. Where exactly do you plan on going?"

"We," the Doctor corrects. "And Earth, probably. Don't you think? They'll be lots of mes running about there. Bound to confuse anyone who comes sniffing around." Flighty and flippant, it feels like
her husband is already miles away, already drowning in his escape plans, head too buried in the sand to see reason. As if to cement her fears, the Doctor holds up a pair of her shoes. "Which do you think? Black or red?"

River blinks at the back of his head, too stunned and bewildered to answer.

The buffoon of a man before her interprets the silence as he pleases, tossing both specimens into the luggage and declaring, "You're right. Impossible decision."

"Doctor," River pleas, voice strained from an oncoming migraine. "Just stop and think for a moment. What's the point in hiding if we'll have to fight them eventually?"

"Maybe not," the Doctor argues, examining a metallic sphere before tossing it over his shoulder and out of sight. "It's early days. Maybe we don't have to fight them. Maybe we can stop this another way. They're worried the child will be powerful, so let's remove the power source. No regeneration energy. No problem."

"You think it's as simple as staying away from the vortex?" River counters, as he hurriedly shovels one of her finer corsets - and are those Vestal Virgin robes? - into their bag.

"Vortex, time travel, trouble- we'll just stay away from it all. Easy. I did it for a year once when I was living with your parents. We can do nine months. Nine months is nothing."

River scoffs, ignoring the dubious suggestion that he's capable of sitting still for an extended amount of time in favor of far more precarious matters. "And what of the universe? What if the prophecy is true?"

"Eh," he shrugs. "The Sisterhood is just being dramatic. Probably. Doomsday criers, the lot of them." He huffs out a laugh that's almost believable, waggling his finger as if he makes enough jokes their problems will disintegrate before their eyes. "Did I ever tell you about the time I saved their 'Eternal Flame' with a fire cracker?"

"Sweetie," River sighs softly, her voice tired, defeated. The Doctor refuses to hear it, prattling on with his farfetched scheme as he snatches up any article of clothing that dares get too close.

"Bit of dust had built up, that's all. They were crying about the end of days when all they needed was
a little **bang**. He claps his hands together, spinning around in a flourish of coattails and overly bright smiles. "Which, in this case, will be you."

As charming as that analogy might have been, River doesn't follow, not that she'd ever admit that aloud. Instead, she arches her brow, watching the Doctor carefully as he skips his way toward her. "Are you saying you don't think the prophecy is true?"

"I'm saying, my naughty little firecracker-" one of his slender fingers reaches out to bop the tip of her nose, infecting her with his impish grin, "-you've got a spark of human in you. There's a chance the baby won't be a Time Lord at all. Maybe he'll take after his mum. I'd rather he had your chin anyway."

He's flippant and dismissive, already back to his task of packing everything they own. River can hardly believe what she's hearing. Her husband, the man who hates endings, is pouring all his hopes into a human child. "The chances of that are... astronomical," River scoffs, her words as incredulous as his are hopeful. "It'd be almost impossible for us to-"

"Almost," he echoes, and the word is so heavy, so despondent, it settles in the air like chalk in her lungs. The stillness lasts only a moment before he's tossing his coats, hanger and all, into the bag. "At the very least, we can still slow the process enough so there's a chance the energy will be dormant. Take away the exposure to the vortex and there might not even be any excess energy at all. No vortex, no energy to soak in. He certainly won't get any from us because we're on our last lives."

He sounds like a drowning man, and in his determination and haste, River wonders if he's even stopped to consider the consequences of what he's proposing. "Sweetie," River sighs, her patience cracking over the endearment. "We can't just-"

"River!" her name explodes from his lips, silencing her, his facade of optimism dropping like a heavy stone. In one hand he clutches a haphazardly packed bag, and in the other, an orange jump suit. His grip on both is deadly and he isn't a drowning man at all. He is the sea crashing and clinging to rocks as it's sucked out by the tide. "Please, River," he begins again, gentler. "We can stop this. We can do anything. But I need you with me."

His eyes burn, grievous and helpless and furious as they were at Demons Run, as the day she tore him down so he could build something better. She can't bear to see him crumble like that again, not when there's something she can do to stop it this time.

"This isn't a fight we can win, River." He pauses, heavy with relinquished power. It's times like this she sees him clearest. In his desperation, he reveals the truth, that time has never been his. It is not
his ally. The Doctor may sail through the vortex, but he is not its owner or its master or its friend. In a way, they are enemies—time just a hole in an hourglass and he just a boy desperate to find more sand. "But I won't run without you."

It's then she sees that he isn't running out of fear, but rather a fate far more dangerous. There's guilt and something malicious brewing behind those optimist eyes. He's fragile and frayed and the beginning of all the things they never let themselves become. That's why the universe only ever let them meet back to front, all those out of order lessons they had to learn lest the fire in their eyes burn the universe to ash. She sees it in him now, everything they've always stopped each other from becoming. The dangerous path they walk is a slippery slope, and once the quirks and costumes and faux smiles fall away, he is simply him: raw and dangerous and repentant, searching for forgiveness that can't be found. River knows. She's been there. She's lost her footing enough times to know that when people like them fall, they cause avalanches, mudslides, and earthquakes. They claim lives by the thousands. If he starts fighting now, that's what he'll become. Maybe the prophecy got it wrong. Maybe it isn't the child that rains destruction, but rather its father and just how far he'd go to protect it. Maybe the only way to save the universe is to run from it.

River inhales strength, nodding like her faith is restored. In response, the Doctor's eyes shine like maybe, just maybe, her belief is enough to make him believe it too. There was never any chance in saving her, but maybe they can save their child. Maybe they can befriend chance and bend the laws of physics. Maybe just this once, fate could be swayed. The Doctor gives her hope, inspires her as he has so many others before her. She surrenders with a sigh. It's soft and it's sad and there's just one more thing she has to do before she waves her white flag.

"He'll be human," River says softly, mournfully, because she has to say it aloud before it can be real, has to see the understanding in his eyes before she believes he truly knows for what he's bargaining.

Forever is a distant fantasy to them now, their own immortality is waning; but even so, they'll outlive any human child and River can hardly bear the thought. The Doctor's answering breath is as brittle and as quick as the lifespan of the entire human race, his smile as fragile and fleeting as a flower that only survives the spring as he says, "Better little time than no time at all."

Delicately, River reaches out to him, extracting the orange hazard suit from his hand. It's coarse from use and heavy with the weight of past adventure. River curls her fingers around the garment, clutching it as if their shared history is stronger than anything the future can possibly throw at them. "Stay out of trouble for a few months," River concedes, gazing up at her husband through glossy eyes. "How hard could it be?"

"No, I am not bloody alright!" River hisses, keeping her voice low. "My concussed, human husband, who's supposed to be leading a nice, quiet life is unconscious on my settee because he was just attacked by aliens."
Across the small expanse of her kitchen, Jack lounges against the counter, shrugging. "You could always tell him it was a very ugly dog."

Unamused, River levels him with a scowl so intense his next of kin probably flinches. "He's human. Not an idiot."

"Sounds like a synonym to me," Jack sneers. "But he's not the one I'm worried about."

"I'm fine," River answers just a bit too quickly, brushing hair behind her ear and looking away. "The baby's fine, too," she appends, quieter, a protective hand falling to her stomach. The child inside her shifts, pressing against her bladder, and River must admit, she's never been so grateful to feel mild discomfort. "The excitement just got to him, that's all."

The deep-set frown on her friend's face tells her he isn't buying her thinly-veiled excuses. "You collapsed on me, River," he scolds, voice sharp with accusation. "Right after you used the vortex manipulator. Am I supposed to not be concerned about that? Are we just going to pretend it didn't happen?"

"I said we're fine," River snaps, the tone of her voice a venomous warning.

"Stubborn, is what you are," the man before her scoffs, arms folding over his broad chest. "You're the one who told me it was dangerous. They're you're rules, Riv-"

"Yes, my rules," she snarls. "And I can break them if I like." Her old friend is seasoned in the ways of her sharp tongue, barely flinching when confronted with her harsh tone. His heart is in the right place, she knows. It's hardly his fault he's saying things she doesn't want to hear. Only slightly remorseful for snapping at him, River lets out a steadying breath, changing the subject. “Besides, just once won't hurt. More importantly, what are we going to do about him?"

It's the only olive branch he's going to receive, and Jack must know what's good for him, because he lets the diversion slide, still eyeing her as he offers, "Owen looked him over. He's fine, mild concussion and some bruises."

River turns away from his protective stare, leaning against the sink as she grumbles, "Not sure I trust his opinion."
"It's that or the hospital." River must visibly bristle at the suggestion because Jack kicks off the counter, coming to stand by her side.

"You know he can't," River whispers, the exhausted protest falling from her lips as her hand comes to rest on her stomach, making soothing circles. "Neither of us can."

River refuses to meet his gaze, but she can feel Jack's eyes on her, concern radiating off him in waves. He doesn't speak for a long moment. His silence says enough, that he understands even if he doesn't approve of the situation. He offers comfort in the only way he can, his tender words as reassuring as any as he says, "He's not made of glass, River."

"I know," River sighs, and she almost believes it. It's not an easy sell to make when he's unconscious before her. River's eyes are locked on him, gazing over the counter and into the next room. Her husband's lanky form is sprawled safely on her settee, head cradled by cushions, but all she can see is the way his skull cracked against the pavement. He’s so much more breakable now, in this human skin, his bones more prone to cracking and his single heart far, far too open. He’s trusting and vulnerable, allowing her to slip past his defenses in a single day when once it took decades. He let her under his skin, hers the moment he asked her a question she didn’t dare answer.

"He'll probably just be mad I third-wheeled his date," Jack jests, the chuckle in his tone summoning River from her reverie.

"There was someone with him tonight," River blurts, suddenly alert as she shifts her attentions to Jack. "A girl."

Intrigued, Jack furrows his brow, lips pursed. "Young?"

River hums in agreement, thoughts latching onto the puzzle like the distraction is a breath of fresh air. "He said she was his assistant." She works her bottom lip, narrowed eyes boring a hole in the cabinet behind Jack’s shoulder as she adds in a hushed but harsh tone, "I don't trust her."

When she looks up, Jack is smirking. "You're jealous."

"I'm not!" River scoffs, the mere suggestion beneath her. But it tastes like a lie even as it leaves her tongue, and Jack’s lips only curl further as he stares down at her knowingly. Taking a calming breath, River continues, "I'm telling you, she had something to do with that attack. Canintiles never
travel in threes."

"Was she doing anything suspicious or untoward?"

"She got a message the same time you sent me one."

Jack arches a brow, a smirk still twitching the corner of his cheeks. "A young person checked their phone. Alert the authorities."

"It's more than that. She was... strange. She just left out of the blue in the middle of the quiz."

"An attractive girl had somewhere better to be than trivia night with an old married couple? Suspicious indeed. Shall I have Gwen flog her?"

“I never said she was attractive,” River turns up her nose in protest. Jack only snorts, because the Doctor’s reputation never fails to precede him. "Regardless, I'm telling you, there's something off about that girl. I feel it."

"Or," Jack counters, far too condescending for River's liking, "she's just a pretty girl who went to a pub quiz with her eccentric boss and got interrupted by a saucy pregnant woman."

A huff of halfhearted defiance stirs the curls that frame her face. She'd be lying if she said part of her didn't want this to be as simple as jealousy, not that she'd ever admit to such an unbecoming quality. But there’s a feeling she can’t quite shake, a knot in the pit of her stomach, an uneasiness in her bones that she felt on sight. This was more than jealousy. This tasted like sabotage. Her instincts were sure of it, and trusting them is the only reason she’s still alive. Someone sent those Canintiles after them. If not Maddie, then who?

River's tired eyes drift back to the Doctor, seeking solace and refuge and home. Her fingers still tingle from the way he held her hand. Something slipped back into place at the feel of his skin, and he took it with him just as quickly when he pulled away. He felt none of it, she’s sure. Even on a good day, he's oblivious to the effect he has on her. Looking at him now, it's easy to tell that he's resting far too peacefully to know the depths of her devotion, far too naïve to know that he could turn her whole world upside down with a single brush of his lips. Right now, he’s blissfully unaware of prophecies and the danger that lies ahead, unburdened by the looming darkness in their future. He is unscarred by their ragged history and the rough terrain behind them.
It'll almost be a shame when the time comes to open the watch, when that innocence fades from his eyes and is replaced by the man she married. It's hardly the first time she's kept something universe-ending from him. She's always known things that might happen or would happen or could never happen. Keeping secrets had become as easy as breathing for her, and a life of tip-toeing along the fragile strings of fate had taught her when to hold her breath and when to scream her lungs out. But right now felt different than all the times before. The child inside her made every decision heavier somehow. The world is still grey, but at the center of it, there is a light, and she would set fire to the world to keep it burning.

"What are you gonna tell him?" Jack's voice stirs River from her thoughts. She lets out a long-suffering sigh, because if she's learned anything in her long life, it's that the future has a nasty history of complicating the present.

"I'm not sure."

"You could always wipe his memory." River must blanch at the mere suggestion because Jack shrugs. "What? Not like you haven't done it before."

"No," River objects quickly, then schools herself as she clarifies. "That won't be necessary. I'll think of something."

"How 'bout the truth?"

River scoffs out a hollow laugh; then, turning to see Jack's face, she sober. "You can't be serious."

"Why not? If he knows why he's in danger, he might cooperate."

"Yes, because that would go over well. Aliens exists, oh, and by the way, you're one of them."

River’s mocking words slip out in a quiet hiss, and Jack rolls his eyes.

"It's like you two learned nothing from that little stint after the Library."

"This is different." The words fly out in a defensive rush, squaring her shoulders to hide the way her hearts ache. "We came to this decision together. Lay low until the baby is born, and then, assuming the universe doesn't burn, we'll wake him up and go from there. That's the plan," she recites and not for the first time, wonders if it's for her benefit or Jack's. "And I'm going to follow through with it as
"Because the plan is working out perfectly so far," Jack snorts, and River pins him with a glare.

"This is just a hiccup. I can keep him safe from some lunatic without blowing his cover." She's never been so determined, eyes drifting back to her unconscious husband, speaking softly. "No one wants him back more than me. But if we tell him now, the past six months will have been for naught."

"And if all this prophecy mumbo jumbo turns out to be true?" Jack speaks, words heavy with the weight of all her fears. "Won't all this have been for nothing anyway?"

Breath stolen from her lungs and words lodging in her constricting chest, River stares at Jack. Inner sadness must be seeping out through her eyes, because Jack's features soften to something that looks a bit too close to pity. Her lips part, sharp tongue ready to lash at the air until the small vulnerability is forgotten, but before she can answer, a groan rumbles from her living room.

Jack and River fall silent, argument ceasing as their eyes fall on the Doctor. He sits up on the settee, looking around in confusion until his eyes land on River. They brighten instantly, woes momentarily forgotten, a greeting on his tongue when-

"Mornin', Sleeping Beauty," Jack’s overly-chipper declaration shatters the silence like a brick through a painted glass window. Remembering that his surroundings are not his own, the Doctor furrows his brow, gaze shifting to Jack, then back to River.

"Where am I?"

"My flat," she answers quickly, forcing a smile.

The Doctor nods slowly, wincing as he rubs at his head. "Tell me someone spiked my drink and this is what a hangover feels like."

"If only," Jack barks out a laugh, and her husband’s face scrunches like the sharp sound is the source of his throbbing temple.
"What happened?"

“Mugger.”

“Aliens.”

River and Jack answer in unison, and she turns murderous green eyes on her now former friend.

"Aliens?” her concussed, and now baffled, husband parrots, still clutching at his head.

River grits her teeth, a laugh not even she believes bubbling from her lips. "You took a nasty fall,” she begins, explaining away Jack’s obnoxious honesty.

But it seems the captain is having none of her distractions or excuses, interrupting her to add, "Lucky River's such a crack shot or you'd have been Canintile chow."

Still blinking in confusion, the Doctor can’t seem to decide where to focus his bewildered eyes, the woman he barely knows or the devilishly handsome lunatic to her right. "What's a... Canintile?"

"It's what attacked us,” Jack explains effortlessly, spilling her secrets as if they are nothing. River grits her teeth into a too-bright smile. Never has she been as tempted to test the limits of his immortality than she is at this very moment.

"Oh. Right." The Doctor gives a slow nod, dumbfounded as he digests the new information. "And you are?"

"Captain Jack Harkness," he quips, flashing his trademark smirk, lips parting and primed to spill yet more incriminating information.

River stomps his foot before he gets the chance. "Jack was just leaving,” she states, pasting on a tight-lipped smile that begs no arguments. “Stay seated. I'll be right back to explain things."

None too gently, River all but shoves Jack towards the door. Never one to pass up an opportunity to
seize the last word, Jack makes a point to look over his shoulder as he grins, “If you love birds wanted to be alone, all you had to do was ask.” River shoves him harder on principle. Naturally, Jack interprets the assault as a challenge, managing to be even more obnoxious as he adds, "She can't keep her hands off me, this one.”

“Need I remind you,” she warns in a hushed tone, pushing him out of earshot before any more lude comments sneak out of his mouth, and her psychopathic tendencies leave her no choice but to murder him on the spot. “That I fixed your vortex manipulator and I can bloody well break it again.”

“Lighten up, Song,” he chuckles, allowing himself to be herded toward the door. "No plan survives first contact with the enemy. You know that. You gotta adapt.”

Spoken like a true military man and River can't help but scoff. “Aligning yourself with the man-eating aliens now, are you?”

"You know what I mean," he argues gently, turning to face her as they reach the door. "You have to tell him something. May as well be the truth."

"Hardly," River snorts. "And next time you feel like spilling our secrets to a civilian, don't."

“The Doctor isn’t a civilian,” Jack states, and River’s face hardens into stone.

“The Doctor isn’t here.” Her tone is solemn, but it has nothing on her eyes, green and grievous and laced with a desperate dedication, because no one wishes that were different more than her. And yet the man wearing his face is waiting for her on her settee. Life is unfair like that. Jack's actions are benevolent ones, simply trying to ease her hardship in any way he can. But things are different now, no safety net on which to fall back. Jack knows better than most the prices that are sometimes paid when the Doctor isn't around to save the day. It's up to them now, and they have to tread carefully.

“Just being helpful,” Jack shrugs, an accession of guilt to which he'll never admit.

“Well stop it,” River opens the door for him, a gesture of kindness paired with a threat on his life. “I know exactly what you’re doing, Harkness, and I'll sew up that pretty little mouth if you can't keep it shut. Are we clear?”

"Yes, boss," he concedes, an infuriating smirk still clinging to his lips.
"Good." River nods, stern, satisfied. "See what you can find out about that girl, will you? Her name was Maddie."

"Well that narrows it down," he scoffs, then, reading the mood he exhaled a reluctant agreeance. "I'll do what I can."

The man before her turns to leave, and behind her, River registers the tell-tale signs of Ethan whirring to life and whizzing down her hallway. Even if she wasn't glaring Jack into submission, it would be too late to stop the unruly machine, already halfway to her kitchen, no doubt with intent to wreak havoc on her glassware. River lets out a sigh, the door almost closed when she hears a quiet voice.

"Oh, and River." She cracks open the door to find Jack has stilled, the sincerity in his tone making River give pause. "Whatever you decide to tell him, remember that you're trying to gain his trust. Don't build it on a lie."

River huffs, because, quite honestly, Jack was the last person she ever expected to have to give a lecture on the necessity of half-truths. Her counter argument is flippant and easy, the dismissal rolling off her tongue in a knowing caress, "We lie all the time."

"He doesn't know that," Jack corrects, gaze drifting pointedly over her shoulder toward the all-too-familiar stranger in the next room. "You're right, the Doctor isn't here. And I know what you two agreed to, but the game has changed. You have a chance to answer questions. Not everything. But some. Do it the right way. Don't make his mistakes."

The words hit home in a way she hadn't been expecting, yesterday's trials settling on her chest like a granite slab. It all floods back to her, all the conflicting and crushing emotions she felt when she discovered the truth. It feels like she's in the TARDIS library all over again, the book she wrote and all the answers he kept locked away displayed before her, the shame and stubbornness he wore like armour when he claimed he was building something new on a foundation of half-truths. Even now, when she understands his motives, she still remembers the sting. Briefly, she wonders, and not for the first time, how things would have been different if he had told her the truth the moment he found her in that hospital bed.

River nods once, acknowledgment without accordance, before closing the door and turning to face the impossible. She leans against the doorframe, dragging in a deep breath she hopes will bring her strength. Jack’s words were moving, but River’s never been one for poetry. She was a woman of action, and right now, lying was their best bet. Surely, he hadn’t believed that nonsense about aliens anyway. He’d have to be a nutter to buy that, anyone would. She’ll simply explain that it was a joke,
put some ice on his head, and take him home. Simple.

River makes her way down the hall, confident that the events of this evening will pass like a ship in the night. But when she rounds the corner to her living room, she finds the Doctor sitting on her couch with a far-off look in his eyes. There’s something in his hands, a small electronic device that looks suspiciously like-

Owen’s medical scanner.

*Oh, he is so paying for that.* The swell of confidence inflating her lungs bursts instantly, a dejected sigh on her lips and all her cleverly crafted lies coagulating in her throat. The scanner is a blatant anachronism, too much history to fit in his twenty-first century hands. His gaze is distant, and she can tell the device sits heavy in his palms by the way his fingertips stroke absentmindedly over the futuristic tech

Laden steps pull River across the room, the space between them closing as the void that separates them grows larger with every passing moment. Her movements are slow and deliberate, calming an animal that’s easily spooked, as she takes a seat beside him on the small sofa. It isn’t as close as she once would have been, as she’d like to be now, but she doesn’t dare touch him, doesn’t dare speak, lest the intrusion send him bolting from the room.

She tries not to stare, fretful eyes scanning the walls of her own flat. It's never felt so empty, so lacking, so little like home. No photos adorn her walls, no personal touches to be found, and suddenly she feels swallowed by a museum of things that aren’t truly hers. The silence around herself and the man that was once her husband feels like smog, thick and oppressive and poisonous. Her thoughts are at war with themselves, torn between truth or lies until she isn’t sure which is the easy way out anymore.

"There's a robot in your kitchen," the Doctor speaks plainly, and suddenly everything is centered, her decision made for her.

"Ethan."

The man beside her turns, eyeing her as if she’d just cursed at him in pig-Latin. "What?"

"The robot's name," River explains, never even sparing a glance to the machine assaulting her dishes. "It's Ethan."
Features softening, he lets out a long sigh, placing the device back on her center table. "Here I was hoping I'd hit my head harder than I thought." Hazel eyes find hers, warm and familiar and impossible to read. "And that thing that attacked us, real too?"

Something about his question stings like trust and innocence, like a lesson they learned the hard way. And just like that, River doesn't want to lie anymore, all her best deceptions and cleverly-spun excuses evaporating as she confesses, "Afraid so."

"Blimey," he huffs out, cheeks inflating as he lets out a long breath. "So aliens exist?"

River nods softly, entranced as she watches him run a compulsive hand through his hair. When he flinches, she reaches into her bra, removing a small jell tablet. "Here, take this," she instructs, holding it out to him. She had planned to spike his tea with it, but seeing as aliens were already out of the metaphorical bag, there was really no point. "It'll cure that headache."

He eyes her curiously, and River must admit, cleavage isn't an ideal place to keep one's drugs, but her dress didn't have pockets and a girl has to make use of what she can. "What is it?" he asks suspiciously, but he's already reaching out to pluck the medicine from her palm.

"Not sure exactly. A wise man once told me it was spacey wacey Paracetamol. It'll fix that concussion no problem." He's eyeing her warily, so River’s lips stretch upward, certain the reassuring gesture looks more like a shadow than a smile.

He doesn't notice, or maybe he does and he simply decides to trust her anyway. Whatever the reason, he pops the pill into his mouth, swallowing hard. His Adam's apple bobs and River braces herself for a whirlwind of questions about monsters and aliens and magic pills when-

"Who was that?"

River blinks, baffled tongue paralyzed as she waits for her mouth to catch up with her brain. "Jack?" she queries, surprised eyes cutting to the door, stunned to find that he's more concerned about the handsome man leaving her flat than he is extraterrestrial life.

There's stone angels nipping at their heels and a crack in the universe eating away at anything that gets too close, but he takes the time to smirk, a hint of jealousy in his eyes as he quips, "How can you be engaged 'in a manner of speaking'?"
"He's an old friend," River answers honestly, no teasing or tempting riddles dancing in her tone. "We work together."

He hums, an indifferent, contemplative sound that tells her he isn't at all convinced. "Fighting aliens?"

"Fighting is a strong word," she corrects, and it sounds absurd even as she says it. "Mostly we catch and release."

"So when you said you worked at the tourist information center, you were lying?" It's more accusation than question, piercing the most human part of her.

River sits a little straighter. "Not technically," she shrugs, chin high and tone clipped with just an ounce of defiance. The Doctor's gaze finally meets hers, his expression dubious. River simply smirks, a loophole ready and waiting on her tongue. "All our clients are from out of town."

"I knew you didn't seem the type to work somewhere do ordinary." He shakes his head, repressing a chuckle. "Is that a common occurrence?"

Despite the lightness in his laugh, she knows he means lying and River sobered, more honest than he knows as she promises, "Comes with the territory, but I'm trying."

His gaze falls to his lap, to the hand that had so briefly held hers. He works his jaw, mulling over the impossible information she's serving him on a platter. "What did they want, can you tell me that?"

"Dinner, I expect."

"Nothing else?"

It's a leading question and those hazel eyes find hers, the amber around his pupils dark in that way they only ever are when he's hiding something. Everything inside River demands she reach out and touch him, that she press her forehead to his and ease his troubled thoughts. Their linear time together had spoiled her, granting the freedom to peek inside his mind whenever she pleased, to comfort him with memories they no longer had to suppress or keep hidden. But now they're back to the
beginning, back to silences filled with secrets and curious gazes that linger just a fraction too long.

Back to settling for almosts, River gently turns his question on him, "What else is there?"

“I dunno,” he squirms, shoulders shifting like they have a mind of their own. "Nothing like this has ever happened to me before. Are they after you?"

“No,” River declares, watching carefully as the man before her continues to fidget, looking anywhere but at her.

"I was just thinking, wondering, curious, if it was coincidence, seeing you and running into those things?” He's right to be suspicious. From his perspective, she's brought him nothing but trouble, because, well, some things never change. His intuition being one of them. He’s always had that way about him, knowing just what to ask to make it impossible for her to give a straight answer. The fragile truth rests upon a mountain of spoilers, yes and no both true for all the reasons he would never suspect.

It takes her a heartbeat or two to find words, half hoping for a distraction. And yet, the one time she longs for the sound of shattering glass, Ethan proves himself to be the perfect maid. Tension only grows thicker and it’s hard to gather her thoughts when he's looking at her like that, sad eyes expecting the worst, as if she needs motive to be around him. At the sight of it, her bold tongue takes over, and River can’t help but carry on in a more playful tone, a rather distracting smirk playing at her cheeks as she says, “Maybe the Canintiles aren’t the only ones that think you look tasty.”

He flushes crimson under the scrutiny of her flirtatious banter. She doubts there’s any blood left in his body that’s not in his cheeks, and the urge to comfort him strikes again. River's hand reaches out to him, careless to the alarm bells blaring in her mind. She’s almost to his knee when she sees him stiffen, just a fraction, but it’s enough for her courage to crumble. Her fingers retreat, curling into the safety of her palm as her hand finds a new destination on the settee, resting on the cushion between them. Silence takes the room and she’s certain she’s scared him off, that any moment he’ll declare her to be mad and storm out of her flat in a flurry of manic limbs.

But he doesn’t. He stays seated beside her despite the nervous energy radiating off him in waves. He’s listening even though everything about his transformation was designed to make him run. Chance or fate or the very foundation of causality demands he turn toward her, his eyes drawn to the hand she placed between them. The smile on his lips is a peace treaty, and River swears her skin burns when he follows the appendage up her forearm and bicep until his eyes have found hers once again. The subtle twitch of her lips is a mirror of his own, voice tender as she begins, "I know this is hard to imagine-"
"Too bloody right." He huffs out a disbelieving laugh. "An hour ago the most exciting thing to ever happen to me was knitting class, and now you're telling me wild alien snake dogs live in Cardiff."

"They don't technically live here," River corrects. "But that's neither here nor there."

"They migrate?" His brow pinches, an inquisitive tilt to his chin, and of course he chooses that on which to fixate. Ever the curious soul, her husband.

River chews on her words, rolling them behind her teeth as she decided how best to explain. "Cardiff sits on a rift—like a hole in space-time. Sometimes things fall through."

"And you... put them back?" He’s watching her like her students do, wide eyed and curious, twisting his body and inching ever closer.

"When we can, yes." River treads carefully, wary of disclosing too much. But her chin is held high, worldly and wise, the professor teaching her ever-eager pupil. "And when we can't, we keep people safe."

That loaded admission seems to make him pause, lips pursing and eyes crinkling. He won't approve of what that subtlety insinuates. He was a hypocrite like that. The only executioner permitted to roam the cosmos was him, and River braces for his inevitable lecture about valuing all creatures when, "You must find yourself in quite a bit of trouble."

"Is that a problem?" she asks playfully, surprised green eyes sparkling with mirth.

"No, no. Of course not." He’s quick to correct her, half of him still miles away while the other hums with giddy energy. "It's wonderful and mad. The kind of thing I've only ever dreamed about."

His eyes drift over her shoulder, focusing on nothing in particular. He’s distant, lost in a thought he can’t quite remember. River’s inside prickle and buzz, sounding more eager than she should as she encourages, "Oh?"

He blinks back into the now, too boyish to be her oncoming storm as he admits, "Most recently I had a dream about treeborgs."
"Treeborgs?" River parrots, voice light with a fondness she hopes he interprets as innocent curiosity. "What do you mean?"

"Trees plus technology," a sheepish grin steals his lips as his eyes, keen and bright, lock with hers. "I'm in a maze. Well, in a space ship in a maze. I'm running from statues, and there's a greenhouse of some kind at the heart of the ship. And there are these cybernetic trees that soak up starlight to make oxygen. Like a..." he pauses for breath, considering.

"Forest in a bottle," they say in unison and the Doctor blesses her with that beaming smile she's missed so dearly.

"Exactly," he breathes, the warmth in his expression cascading over her like daylight.

"You have lots of dreams like this, then?" River questions, voice even despite her hammering, hopeful hearts. Some parts of his old life are still dormant in his subconscious, manifesting as far-flung fantasies. They're fuzzy and out of focus, like any half-forgotten dream ought to be. But on some level, he remembers. River's hearts swell, a light in her eyes that had been extinguished months ago suddenly roaring back to life. She tries to banish the thought lest it consume her, before hope becomes quicksand at her feet.

Eyes bright and shoulders back, he looks open and inviting, something on the tip of his tongue just begging to be set free. He sways slightly in his seat, fighting some gravity that pulls him toward her. River finds herself leaning towards him, too, willing words to fall from his lips and delight her ears with more dreams of waterfalls that flow upwards or mountains that sing or any of their half-remembered adventures.

But it must be a dark thought that dances at the front of his mind, because the light in him fades in a moment. He blinks like a spell is broken, eyes downcast and taking all his secrets with him as he mutters, "Yeah, well, you know, everyone has strange dreams every now and then." He's oddly dismissive, once again a million miles away as he clears his throat, making to stand. "I should probably..."

River follows after like a reflex, steadying him when he sways on uneasy feet. The tweed is rough against her palm and suddenly he isn't the only one lightheaded. "Stay," River blurts, and the Doctor turns to face her, surprise written in the way his eyes widen. River lets her hands trail off his shoulders, fingertips skimming his arm as she softly adds, "It's late and you can hardly walk." A protest is forming behind his floundering lips, and River quiets him with bewitching green eyes and an impish smile. "Besides, there's monsters about."
He watches her, seemingly entranced by the way her eyes sparkle under fluorescent lights. "You'd let a total stranger sleep on your couch?"

He could have a damn sight more than just her couch, but River doesn't dare scandalize the poor dear by mentioning that. Instead, she bats deceptively innocent eyes and coos, "Only handsome ones."

He flushes again, cheeks stolen by a slow, twitching smirk. "You're utterly mad, did you know?"

"Do you flatter everyone or is that just the concussion talking?"

"Bit of both, I imagine."

"Lie down," she chuckles, throaty and genuine, flashing him a smile he can’t refuse. "I'll fetch you a duvet."

No protests chase her as she begins to walk away. He simply rocks on his heels, and she wonders if he’s battling his instinct to follow her or bolt while he still has the chance. River decides for him, eyes pinning him in place for as long as they can before she turns and makes her way down the hall, toward her linen closet in search of a spare blanket and a pillow. Maybe it’s her hormones playing up, but she feels nervous, like a schoolgirl with a crush. Her body hums with the desire for closeness, to sit with him and talk in the most innocent way possible. She wants to snuggle beneath the blanket and simply be near him. Maybe he wants that, too. Maybe they’ll stay up all night, battling sleep the way they once battled Daleks. Maybe he’ll quiz her about aliens like he used to when she was studying for her exams. Maybe his closeness will be enough for her to pretend it's just another night on the TARDIS. Maybe, just for tonight, pretending can be enough.

Successful in her endeavor to find bedding, River heads back toward the living room, an offer of tea waiting on already parted lips. When she rounds the corner, she finds herself instantly silenced. The Doctor is passed out on her settee, snuggled into her cushions like a man deprived of sleep. He so rarely slept before; it’s almost odd to see him like this now. There’s been the rare occasion over the years, of course, when exhaustion would claim him, but mostly he would simply lie beside her and pass the night by making shapes out of the grooves on the ceiling.

Whether tonight is a side effect of the pill she gave him or just the result of a long day, River isn't sure. She was only gone a moment, but it appears that’s all his tired, human body required. Rather than an offer of tea, a sigh that's an odd concoction of nostalgia and disappointment slips out from between her lips. Her shoulders droop, suddenly heavy. She can feel the weight of her defenses slipping from her frame, pretense and fake smiles evaporating as she covers her sleeping husband with a warm blanket. He’s made himself at home in her small flat, his shoes tucked neatly in the
corner and his coat folded over the arm of the chair. Guard down and armour surrendered, River is unable to stop herself from running her fingers through his hair, brushing the stray strands from his face. He hardly stirs at the touch, a delighted hum rattling his chest. The sound radiates through her, soothing her as if she were the one about to drift off into dreams.

"Goodnight sweetie," River whispers, a tired smile tugging at her cheeks.

In the adjacent room, she hears a low hum indicating that Ethan is powering down for the night. River spares him a mournful glance, knowing full well that she’ll get an earful from the nagging machine the moment they’re alone. She’ll get soggy spinach for dinner for a week as penance for not heeding his warnings.

With tomorrow already dangling over her like a weight, River makes for her bedroom, closing the door behind her. Lights burst to life, the door clicks behind her, and suddenly she is devastatingly, crushingly, alone. Her own thoughts seem to echo off the empty walls. They scream of consequences, of vortex manipulators, and the time energy she swore to renounce. Her knees still ache where she collapsed onto the rough pavement, the sharp pain in her side more terrifying than any monster she’s ever faced. For a moment, all her worst fears were realized.

But then, the crackle of the vortex subsided. The pain in her side faded to a dull roar, and the only thing in the universe was the Doctor, lifeless on the ground before her. River’s palms fall to her stomach, an apology and regret she cannot put to words. People keep telling her that motherhood is something she’ll grow into, that her instincts will kick in when the baby is born, that somehow she’ll just know the right thing to do and when to do it. They forget that a cradle is something she never had, that emotions are something she had to relearn after they were beaten out of her. People say the word "instinct" and she pictures a gun before a pacifier. When they talk of what’s “motherly,” River can’t help but think about how some marsupials will throw their young to the wolves if it means the mother can make an escape.

They tell her that it will all come naturally to her, and River politely bites her tongue, forcing a smile, because “motherly instincts” are a relative thing.

She proved it tonight, by putting the Doctor first. She should be glowing, and yet the only emotions that seem to consume her these days are fear and loneliness. And maybe it’s her need for company that compels her to stand by the mirror above her dresser and lift up her shirt, revealing her stomach. Encased inside her fragile skin is the most valuable thing in the universe. She feels him in there, not as fidgety as his father is, so River pokes at her stomach until the child inside stirs, giving an indignant kick to her bladder.

A laugh that might be a sob bubbles from between her lips, because maybe, she isn’t quite as alone as she feels. "You scared me, you know,” River whispers to her belly. “Don’t ever do that to me
It's her fault, she knows. The baby must sense it too, because her scolding earns her no response. There's guilt in her veins and her son must be all too aware. His silence deafens her, her screaming thoughts are too much to bear, and River finds herself swallowing past a lump in her throat.

"I'm sorry," she confesses, quiet as the night and resolute as the beginning and end of all things. "I did it to save Daddy. Old habit, I suppose," fond amusement huffs out of her lips, because keeping the Doctor safe was her first priority, always. And when push came to shove, she relapsed without a second thought. "I guess that's something I'll have to work on, isn't it?"

She has something infinitely more precious to look after now. Maybe being a mother isn't instinct at all. It isn't something you know. It's something you learn. If she can learn to take a life, maybe she can learn how to nurture one, too. River holds onto that hope like a lifeline as her hand makes soothing strokes over her stomach, tracing along her bump of her stomach the way his fingers trail across her skin, making patterns on the swell of her hip. Words of comfort are swirled into her side, the carefully crafted circles a language of their own. His other arm is draped over her shoulders, pulling her close as if the blanket of his embrace will be enough to keep the nightmares at bay. Sleep dances just beyond her reach, and when he begins his nightly lullaby, it's in a tune only she can understand. His native tongue fills the dark spaces of her dormitory, silencing the demons of her past.

"Gallifreyan doesn't have a word for love, not like humans do, anyway." His voice is different, more reserved, the one he only uses when the night is quiet and full of secrets. His touch is feather light as it scrawls designs into her cotton pajamas, but his presence is warm, safe. She's half asleep and his voice is the only sound in the universe, the designs on her hip and the tips of his fingers the closest to home she's ever felt. "They have words for eternity, birth, and death. But they weren't really the sentimental type, as cold as they were ancient, and as clinical as they were wise."

The pillow dips beside her and if River didn't know any better, she'd swear his lips brushed her forehead.

"That's why I travel with you lot." There's a sigh and a smile in his tone. "Humans are so much braver than any Time Lord I've ever known." He traces his fingers over her skin like a promise, lulling her into sleep. It's a different design this time, a different language, as he scrawls the human symbol for infinity on her skin.

"He's a lot of work, your dad, but he's worth it." It's a promise, and she seals it the way he taught her to, with swirling fingers and forgotten languages on bare skin. "You haven't met him yet, not really, but you'll love him."
Green eyes are fixed on the mirror, but she isn’t gazing at her reflection. She’s staring right through it, imagining the man that lies just on the other side of the wall, the one that almost got himself killed in the name of keeping her safe, that made himself a footprint of his former self in hopes of changing the future. Her husband is there and yet he is not and River marvels at how someone can be so close and still so far out of reach.

Her only comfort is that no matter what his memories or biology, "He'd do anything for us."

River's voice cracks, but the declaration is anything but fragile. He would take any harrowed path if it meant keeping her safe. He’d go anywhere, do anything. Since the moment she was born, they shared an unbreakable, reciprocal bond. There are two types of people in one's life- there are roads and there are destinations, those you travel with and those you travel towards. Her parents, Jack, and even the monsters of her youth are her companions. They guided her through parts of her life, they shared her years, and molded her into who she would become. But the Doctor, he has and always will be a destination, a pivotal, life changing moment. He's always been where she was going. Even when she had no heading, he's always been home. All her roads have always led to him. But now they lead elsewhere. She has a new destination. Everything she's ever done or will do revolves around the life growing inside her.

Her hearts aren’t racing, but her son kicks anyway, that same hum in her veins she always feels when he’s happy. Inside her is a presence, simple and pure, innocent and sweet. Surely, one little trip through the vortex wouldn't turn their son into a dangerous being. It was quick, a spark, not a wild fire. A small dose of the vortex wouldn't unravel six months of zero exposure. Even as she thinks it, her reasoning is more a hopeful bluff than it is a certainty, River finds herself reaching for the small blade she keeps in her boot.

Bending over is more trouble than it's worth these days and her son wiggles in protest until she is upright once again. The pocket knife is warmer than steel ought to be, but when she drags the sharp edge of it across the back of her forearm, it has nothing on the feel of her blood as it trickles down the back of her hand and knuckles. River hisses quietly against the feel of severed skin. It isn't fatal by any means. It probably won't even scar, but it's the only way to be sure. River stills, breath caught in her throat, waiting for that old familiar glow, for that tingling of time in her veins. The fate of the universe hangs in the balance as she waits for her son's rejuvenation energy to heal her.

But nothing happens. Minutes go by, or an hour, or an eternity, and nothing happens. Outwardly, River breathes a sigh of relief, all her trapped oxygen rushing out like it's the first breath she's ever taken. "See? You're fine, aren't you, darling?"

He answers her with a sharp elbow to her ribs, and River's eyes gloss over. Everything's going to be just fine.
But the swelling of her hearts is bitter sweet. So far, all is well. Their child is still human, a fact that manages to build her up and break her all in the same moment. It comforts her and it crushes her, because if all goes to plan, the being she loves most in all the cosmos will last little more than a blink in a timeless universe. And if it doesn't, if she gets what she truly desires, all of creation suffers. She's fractured timelines to say "I love you" before, but never has she weighed her pain greater than that of all living things. Why fate sees fit to keep testing her resolve is something she will never understand. River hates herself for the quiet, selfish voice inside her that would give anything to see gold ripple across her skin. Guilt washes over her like ice water, because the fate of the universe seems a small price to pay when it comes to years spent with her future child. And yet, she finds herself fighting like hell to keep the kiss of immortality from her son's veins.

_Better little time than no time at all._

Her husband's words echo in her mind like a salve, patching up a wound that will probably never fully heal. It isn't like the cut on her arm that will scab and scar. Love and loss mark the soul rather than skin, and birthing a child she knows she'll outlive may just tear her in two. It was an easier pill to swallow when the Doctor was here, when they were together in their suffering, before the life inside her became real, before he kicked and wiggled and took naps on her bladder. But right now the only Gallifreyan scripture is hers. Tonight there are no words of comfort to be heard, no one to wrap their arms around her and quell her bad dreams. And after her arm is cleaned and the lights have gone out, River climbs into an empty bed, where she falls asleep to the tune of prophecies resonating in her head, a deadline in her veins, a bomb in her chest, and the whole universe resting on her shoulders.
He'll never let her far from his sights now that he's had a taste of the truth, of something more exciting than just knitting class and pub quizzes. He'll latch onto her like the addict he's always been. And she's no better. Even when he's not really him, his presence is like a drug, an elixir she can't help but drink. And look what temptation got her- a self-inflicted cut and an almost-husband with a mild concussion. She gained his trust at the cost of his ignorance. She couldn't leave him well enough alone and River can't help but wonder what else her actions will cost him. What unforeseen risks lie in wait for him now that she's let him back into their world of monsters and aliens?

“We are all humiliated by the sudden discovery of a fact, which has existed very comfortably, and perhaps been staring at us in private, while we have been making up our world entirely without it.” - George Eliot

Karn is every bit as foreboding as she read it would be. It's dark but it isn't night. Shadows leak from the black sky and creep across stones that have never seen starlight. There is no day here, he tells her. There is no sun. There is only the Flame and those who watch over it. The air in her lungs is heavy and it sticks to her insides the way ash has settled over the placid lakes. It's water or acid or tar or some other terrible secretion. It's black as a void and just as deep. Every breath makes her nose burn, and it reeks of volcanic fumes, fire bursting like a geyser out of jagged stone. Orange tendrils reach upward, licking at the black beyond but River keeps her eyes forward, gaze locked on the woman that guides them. She looks nearly as brittle as the stones that crack and crumble beneath the soles of her shoes. Her crimson cloak drags over treacherous rocks, but the pebbles don’t dare cling to her, gravel and dirt seemingly fearful of the blood-red fabric. A hood conceals wiry hair and worn skin, each wrinkle a secret, the creases on her hands just carvings from a long and serpentine past.

Beyond the High Priestess, the path ahead leads to an opening in the side of a cliff face. Barren and leaking despair, it looks more like the gateway to Hell than it does a meeting ground. The cave seems to eat the light around it like the event horizon of a black hole. As they grow closer, River's hand drifts toward the blaster at her side. Flesh finds her palm before cold metal does as the Doctor's fingers capture hers. Those long digits entwine with her own and River looks over to him, finding a reassuring smile. If smile is even the right word. His lips are a thin line, the corners of which seem desperate in their endeavor to curl. They barely succeed, and what little light does reach his eyes looks more like need than it does hope. His features struggle to keep up the facade, his smile like a fireplace in a drafty room, a flicker of warmth battling a bone-deep chill.
Their cloaked guide doesn’t hesitate as she crosses the threshold. River takes a deep breath, steadying her shoulders as if she were preparing for Judgement Day. Light engulfs her as quickly as the darkness had, the cave before her lit with torches and gaseous vents. Chancing a glance over her shoulder, she discovers that the path they walked is now swallowed by black abyss, the entrance to the cave a cloud of darkness. Turning back to the woman who summoned them, River releases the breath in her lungs, breathing anew. It smells of sulfur and arcane magic, and down one of the corridors, chanting can be heard as women in similar robes stand hand in hand in a ritualistic circle.

"I assume you know why we have invited you here," Ohila speaks first, foreboding tone echoing off convex walls.

The Doctor answers before River can, too crisp and chipper for the dark and musty room. "I don't suppose it's to give me another cracking cup of tea?"

"Our Elixir cannot give regenerations, Doctor, only manipulate them. And you have been out of energy for some time now."

"That's a no on the tea, then?" he scoffs, leaning into Rivers side. "All the way up here and they don't even offer us a cuppa. Some people, aye?" To anyone else, his joviality would bring relief to uneasy nerves, but River knows him well enough to know jokes are how he keeps fear at bay.

"Just as well, sweetie," she plays along, if only for his sake. "Rule 442, never drink anything given to you by a cultist."

"We are not a cult." Ohila's eyes flash like a solar storm, but River merely arches a pointed brow.

"Tell that to your robes."

"You are here," the Priestess states firmly, annoyed. "Because the universe is in danger."

"When is it not?" the Doctor jests in a huff of hollow laughter.

"The universe is in danger because of you." The woman’s eyes fall to River, dropping to her
stomach and the precious cargo inside. River's body goes taut, bristling even as she brings a protective hand to her belly. "We've looked into the future. The child you carry, if it comes into the world, it will bring fire with it."

"A prophecy then," River interjects, a bored sigh on her lips. "You should know I don't take kindly to those."

Ohila's eyes, brimming with fear and disdain, snap to River's. "We know all about you, the TARDIS child who shattered time."

River's face hardens. "And I'd do it again in a heartbeat."

"That is what we're afraid of. You were conceived in the vortex, by parents that were only human. You got the spark by chance and look at what you became. Now imagine the two of you, a full Time Lord and an anomaly, traveling in a TARDIS, constant exposure to the vortex. What will you two birth? What chaos will the schism make of that child?"

"Well, we were hoping for my legs, his cheekbones, that sort of thing," River retorts, all sass and zero patience. "And as lovely as your prediction sounds, I should believe you why, exactly?"

"You know why," Ohila's eyes fix on River and the Doctor with deadly precision. "It's unnatural."

"Careful," the Doctor snaps, low and dangerous, the fire in his eyes brighter and more entrancing than the light of the eternal flame dancing across his profile. The storm is rising to the surface, hurricanes and wild fire in his eyes. River's never loved him more.

Ohila softens, out of fear or kindness, Rive can't be sure, but the woman ducks her chin slightly in concession as she clarifies, "I only mean to say, it's unprecedented."

The Doctor scoffs, releasing River's hand to pace the dingy room. He drags his fingers across the rocks, collecting dust. His heavy eyes are focused on the black soot staining his skin as he states, "You're giving me far too much credit. How could our baby possibly end the universe?"

"How does a black hole eat light?" Ohila offers easily. "Why does a star supernova? Powerful things are never stable."
River holds her ground, watching silently as the Doctor works his jaw. "Why should we trust you?"

"Because I do not like you enough to lie to you." The Priestess's face is too stoic to be a deception, voice too flat to be speaking anything but truth.

"Why help us, then?" The Doctor turns to face his occasional ally, and under his scrutiny, the lines on her face harden.

"You are many things, Doctor. But always you are on the side of good. The greater good."

"And you're, what, warning me so I can change things?"

"There is no changing things," Ohila's voice is nearly a whisper, a softly spoken sympathy. River studies the cloaked woman, and if the new lines around her ancient eyes are any indication, she looks almost mournful as she delivers her foreboding news. Again, they're telling him he is the universe's only hope. But they offer no elixir to make him a warrior this time, though by the look in his eyes, River doubts he'd need their help for that.

"What would you have me do?" The Doctor asks, part hope, part surrender, and in their silence, an impossible answer is given.

He doesn't shout his protests or make radical claims of denial. His rebellion is found only in his jaw, clenched in defiance and sharp as steel. River reads it in how the air around him shifts, now cold enough to bite and crawl across her skin until she shivers. He's a breath away from crumbling or tearing down this whole parsec in wild fury. His eyes look as black as the random rock in space on which she was born and River can't help but think about how the things she loves most are always being stolen from her. Her child isn't even born yet, still nestled safely in her womb, still growing inside her, and already she feels him slipping away. They've yet to name him, and already creation is cowering at their feet.

"How do you even know the child exists?" River speaks, because the Doctor can't or won't or is afraid of what will spill from his lamenting tongue.

The cloaked woman scoffs, turning agitated eyes on River. "Everyone knows. There was a ripple across space time the moment it was conceived. The bells toll for us all now."
"And what message do they carry? What's everyone so afraid of?"

"Fire and the end of all things."

"You mentioned that bit already," River cuts in. "Specifically, what will happen?"

"If the child is born," Ohila begins, grim hesitation in the steeling breath she takes. "They will return and with them they will bring the end of the universe."

The Doctor's head tilts, suddenly alert. "What do you mean, 'they'?"

It's silent for a heartbeat or two, shoulders stiffening beneath crimson cloaks. When the Priestess finally speaks, her answer cracks like a whip, echoing across stone walls. "The Time Lords."

The Doctor scoffs, shaking his head, denial written in the callous twist of his smile. "Now I know you're talking rubbish. They're in a pocket universe."

"And yet you are scared." She's not wrong. There's fear hiding in the depths of those hazel eyes and Ohila pauses, the weight of her message settling like the lakes of tar that scar this wretched planet. "Distance hasn't stopped them before. In fact, didn't your last meeting with them earn you this face?"

"They never touched me," the Doctor corrects, faux confidence in his wagging finger. "So technically a very nice man in a very unfortunate radiation-filled box got me this face."

Ohila's eyes narrow, clipped tone biting out her next words. "The point stands that they almost found a way in through the Master. They'll do it through you and your child, too."

He's quiet, brain spinning a million miles an hour. River's own thoughts are elsewhere, drunk on churches and sisterhoods and all the people that would dare to dictate her future or manipulate her past. It fills her with a cold fury, an empty determination that used to flow through her veins like an untamed rapid. She replaced it with warmth now, pacified the anger with trust and devotion. But it's still there, still inside her like a locked door keeping back all her inner demons and childhood nightmares. One can never out run the past completely, and as River looks at the Doctor, scared where she is stone, she's reminded that while she is a by-product of her past, the Doctor remains a
prisoner of his.

“We’ll hide somewhere no one will find us,” he says suddenly, determinedly, an idea blooming behind subtly panicking eyes. River’s gaze snaps to him, lips parting in surprise. She finds herself pulled toward him, caught up in the desperation that’s swirling around him like water down a drain. “We’ll limit the fetuses exposure to the vortex. We won’t give them a reason to come after us.”


River reaches his side, the Doctor swaying into her until their shoulders touch, a united force. The Doctor’s resolve is so strong River feels her hearts stutter as he declares, “That’s not your concern.”

Ohila sniffs at their defiance. “What I’m concerned about is life. If that child is born it will bring only death. It’s not just your own people you’ll have to hide from. Think of your enemies. When they hear of this…”

“Are you threatening me?” the Doctor challenges, his quiet, rumbling voice enough to make monuments quiver. He doesn’t step forward or make threatening gestures. He remains perfectly still, the subtle rise and fall of his chest a warning in its own right.

“Not us,” Ohila clarifies, and if she’s intimidated by his display, it doesn’t show. “We are merely delivering a message.” But they aren’t, not really. It’s obvious what they’re asking of him, what they want him to give up. They want the one impossible thing he simply cannot do, the one thing neither of them will ever give up.

There’s always been someone with a plan for her life. When River was young and malleable, she let them. She’s let time take the things she loved most. Her parents. Her childhood. She gave her life. She even let prophecy take the Doctor’s life. She let it make a puppet of her. And it made her lash out like a wounded animal. But River learned from her mistakes, that the rules of time could be carefully bent but never broken. She found out the hard way that foreknowledge was only as trustworthy as its source, that enemies often look like friends, and forgiveness will heal the soul far faster than revenge.

She got it wrong long before she ever got it right. She let the universe have its way with her once. She let it warp and bend her. Break her. Control her. Take from her. But it can’t have this. She’s come too far, too close to everything she never knew she wanted. If keeping her child means reality burns twice, so be it. She won’t give up her child without a fight. Never again will anything be taken from her without first feeling the wrath of her claws. It took a while to see it, but her story has always been her own, and she’ll write it as she chooses. She learned that she is her own, as is her destiny.
And one way or another, the universe will learn it too.

"There are those that will stop at nothing to take this child," the cloaked woman warns. And River takes the Doctor's hand, an unbreakable bond sealed with a dangerous vow.

"They can try."

X

The morning sun proves brighter than her nightmares. Or maybe it's the beaming smile the Doctor has worn since the moment she woke that’s casting the illusion of ease over her troubled thoughts. He's practically giddy as they stroll side by side, across the road and down the few blocks that separate her flat from his shop. All of Cardiff seems to be infected by his smile. The oncoming summer carries a kiss on the breeze and the trees show their delight at the rare sunshine in the form of white and pink blossoms. It's almost enough to make her forget the fate of the universe is resting on her shoulders. Between the open air and blue sky and her husband's excitable yet unknowing eyes, it's easy to get lost in the anonymity. With the sounds of traffic and the chatter of passing strangers filling her ears, she's surprised to notice just how small she feels. It's a rare day when she doesn't have to be River Song, daring archaeologist or woman of mischief and mystery or fugitive on the run. She doesn't think she's ever simply been River Song, pedestrian on the street. It's freeing to be able to walk with him like this. Breathing is a little easier when she allows herself to bask in the Doctor's bubble of ignorance, to buy into the con they so carefully crafted. Beside her, the Doctor whistles a jaunty tune that vaguely reminds her of the Ice Warrior's ceremonial hymn, and for a moment, there are no secrets or catastrophes. They are just two normal people making their way to work.

It's the Doctor that shatters her reprieve, clearly lost in his own thoughts as he blurts out, "Are all aliens like that, all snarly and terrifying?"

He nearly trips over a crack in the pavement as he asks, briefly turning to glare at the offending sidewalk. River simply bites back a smirk, not entirely spoiler and accident free, then. "No, some of them are actually quite ridiculous."

He’s done nothing but ask questions since the moment she stepped out of her bedroom door, and if hearing his voice hadn't been something she’s longed for these last six months, River swears she’d have drugged him by now. Though, she must admit, it’s refreshing to see fire in his eyes, to see that deep down he's still so him. He’s even him in the way he doesn’t notice how her smiles are more like shadows, too caught up in the mystery around him to notice that her own thoughts are a million miles away.
"Where do they come from?" He's got that far away look in his eyes again, and his questions fall out in an amazed rush, one after the other. But at least he's gained some composure. There was a moment over breakfast she was sure his head was going to spin off into orbit. "How many other worlds are out there?"

"Billions? Trillions?" River shrugs as casually as she can, ignoring the blatant irony that the one man who might actually hazard a guess is the one asking the questions. "In an infinite universe, no one knows for sure."

"How many of them live here in Cardiff? Dozens? Hundreds? Do any of them look like us?" He's practically bouncing beside her, all unspent energy and curious, bright eyes. Excitement rolls off him in waves and condenses on River's chest, making it hard to catch her breath.

"My, my, you're a curious one, aren't you?" she huffs out in a strained laugh, and the Doctor flushes. "Sorry," a nervous laugh slips out as he looks away, rubbing at the back of his neck. "It's not every day you learn you're not alone in the universe."

It stings, but River hides it well. Because he is, in fact, alone in the universe. They both are. Each other's company made it bearable. More than bearable, once the current of time finally settled and they could bask in the calm waters of linear life together. But the short reprieve only seems to have made fighting the waves of the present harder. She feels the current tenfold now that he's like this, barely keeping her head above water as the riptide of their situation threatens to drag her under. Jack’s words have done nothing but haunt her. The rules of the game have changed, yes, but she doubts the Doctor will see it that way when this is all over. Someone’s hunting extraterrestrials and he needs to be protected. But at what cost? River's hand gravitates to her stomach, resting on the bump beneath her dress, and suddenly the shuffling of feet beside her sounds like nothing more than a broken promise.

"I'm sorry, by the way." The sound of his voice wakes River from her thoughts, and she glances over to see him gesture towards her handbag. "For breaking your scanney-thing."

He seems to have grounded himself, pink cheeked from more than just enthusiasm now. River fights against the way her lips threaten to curl, remembering the smash that awoke her from slumber and the pale, guilty look on his face as he stood over the shattered remains of Owen's medical equipment. Not that she particularly minded. It's what he gets for leaving his tools lying around.

“It's quite alright," River consoles, releasing him from his guilty conscious. "I subjected you to Ethan's cooking. Consider us even."
"He's a bit odd, isn't he, your robot?" The Doctor's face pinches, not in judgement, but rather, surprise, before a thought occurs to him and he shrugs, "Then again, he could be normal for all I know."

"Oh no, Ethan is most definitely one of a kind," River assures him. Her mechanical companion had been particularly hazardous this morning, practically gyrating as he served up breakfast. Poor dear was shaking so much he managed to spill the better half of the Doctor's orange juice before it even reached the table. The jittery machine was so nervous he didn't even speak, which is probably for the best, all things considered. It's understandable that the Doctor's presence made him uneasy. He knows as well as River does just how close to the chest they're playing this one. For all the comfort it brings her, having her husband this near makes River anxious, too.

There's a part of her that regrets telling him even the slightest sliver of truth. She gave him a glimpse of something great, but hadn't she stolen something, too? Offering candy to a child or time and space to a human never really left much room for choice. The promise of one's wildest dreams always eclipses what's best for them. He'll never let her far from his sights now that he's had a taste of the truth, of something more exciting than just knitting class and pub quizzes. He'll latch onto her like the addict he's always been. And she's no better. Even when he's not really him, his presence is like a drug, an elixir she can't help but drink. And look what temptation got her- a self-inflicted cut and an almost-husband with a mild concussion. She gained his trust at the cost of his ignorance. She couldn't leave him well enough alone and River can't help but wonder what else her actions will cost him. What unforeseen risks lie in wait for him now that she's let him back into their world of monsters and aliens?

As they round the corner and make their way down his street, River's eyes seek out the TARDIS. She's not the same as she once was, brick and windows where once she was vibrant blue, but she still shines like a beacon, still radiates comfort and home. Tucked back in his little shop is the safest place the Doctor can be while River sees to whoever is responsible for the corpses that keep popping up around town. It'll do her some good to back at the Hub, too, to breathe air that doesn't taste faintly of him, to focus on something other than the reason they disappeared in the first place.

"Oh, I never did ask," he begins quietly, and as River glances in his direction, she finds him staring down at his shoes, eyes shyly cutting to her. "Do you have a last name to go with that first name?"

"Song," River offers breezily, and she doesn't miss how his pace slows, pivoting to face her.

"Your name is River Song?" His nose crinkles adorably, tickled by her candid answer, hazel eyes sparkling like he's bearing witness to a maiden in a fairytale. "Is that some kind of alien hunter alias?"
River meets his gaze, answering his coy question with a sly grin. "It might be."

"Lemme guess, you could tell me but you'd have to kill me?"

"Oh, no," she purrs, voice like velvet. And River must admit, she feels much more like the villainous sorceress, eyes alight with something wicked as she says, "There wouldn't be very much fun in that. I'm more of a slow and agonizing torture kind of girl."

"Remind me not to get on your bad side," he snorts, and River turns an accusatory brow on him.

"You say that like you're not already."

"Do you save the lives of everyone on your naughty list?"

"Absolutely," River coos, a dangerous coquette. "One should always save the lives of those with which they have unfinished business."

The Doctor dips his head, voice low with all the invitation she's ever needed. "And what business do you have with me?"

She drags her eyes from the flop of his fringe to his scuffed leather shoes, brow quirked and lips twitching, the purr of her silky voice leaving little to the imagination and much to be desired. "The torturous kind, I'm sure."

The intent in her gaze burns him, and he ducks his head to hide pink cheeks. He’s slowing to a stop, feet dragging across the last few paces to his shop door. A quiet has stolen the moment between them, and he must sense the way farewell dangles on her lips, because he refuses to meet her eyes. He keeps his attentions fixed on his shoes or the trees or the space just beyond her shoulder, as if he knows that the second he acknowledges her, she'll slip into the crowd and out of his life, gone as quickly as she came. Nervous hands buy time, patting at his pockets in search of the keys they both know are in his top pocket. His jacket is rumpled and his hair is a mess, and River can't help but notice the way his bow tie is crooked. Without thought, she interprets the sight as invitation, stepping into his space and reaching for the silk accessory.

He freezes instantly, hand hovering over his breast pocket as River's skilled fingers untie the fabric. It only takes him a moment to realize her intentions. Though his arms may fall to his sides, his breath
remains caught in his throat, Adam's apple trying its best not to wobble as he shatters the silence with a dry, mock laugh, "Look at me, opening shop in the same clothes I left in. What would the neighbors say?"

"Lucky him, I imagine," River hums, low and throaty before giving a self-deprecating shrug. "Or at least they would if you weren't accompanied by a waddling blimp in a dress."

"You're not a blimp," he corrects quickly, instinctively meeting her gaze. "You have a lovely... Uh, not that I was..." He clears his throat, ever the wordsmith. "Lovely. You look lovely."

A smirk tugs River's cheek, green eyes locking with his as her clever fingers continue their work. She doesn't need to see what she's doing. She's done this enough times, folded this silk around his neck and her wrist often enough to shape it with her eyes closed. She's gazed up at him through her lashes enough to know that her close proximity always makes his pulse race. His single human heart must be pounding away inside his chest, and she wonders how he copes with all that adrenaline trapped inside such a fragile frame.

Even after her task is complete, when his bowtie is once again straight, River finds herself reluctant to pull away. Her excuses to linger are fading fast and any minute now she'll have to walk away. But there's just one thing she has to say before she goes. "Listen," she broaches the subject gently. "I know you don't really know me, but can I ask something of you?"

The words have barely left her lips before he's nodding, "Of course. Anything."

It's so easy to take from him and deep down, a selfish part of her wonders if he's this trusting with everyone he meets or if he's simply programed to surrender to her, if no matter his age or face, it's written in his DNA to give her anything she asks of him. "Don't tell anyone what I've told you. Keep this between us, yeah? As a favor."

He's shaking his head, but not in disagreement, gratitude on his lips as he states, "If anything, I'm the one who owes you a favor for saving my life."

"You don't owe me anything," she confesses softly, and her words must carry more meaning than she intends, because his smile slips, feet shuffling.

"Will I see you again?" He looks so hopeful her hearts flutter and clench, love and guilt as tangled up as they always seem to be when it comes to him. River hesitates, because no, she really shouldn't.
She can’t be trusted around him. But he was nothing if not in desperate need of surveillance. “What if I see any more aliens?” he adds persuasively, sensing her inner quandary. "I should have your number. You know, in case of emergency.”

It’s not the worst pick up line she’s ever heard, but still, if it were anyone else she wouldn’t spare them a second glance. But when it's *him* standing there, head tilted to the side, fringe in his eyes, and a cheeky grin tugging his lips, how’s she supposed to resist?

A teasing brow quirks, delaying her inevitable surrender. “Worried about monsters under your bed, are you?”

“No, no,” he scoffs at the absurdity, shaking his head and fighting a smile. “In the closet, maybe.”

River doesn’t even hide her smirk as she grabs her lipstick from her bag, taking a sly step forward and crowding his personal space. Dexterous fingers remove the cap, and her eyes must look as wicked as she feels because he stands taller, swallowing as she grabs his wrist, pulling him towards her. Eyes locked on his as she holds him captive, River uses her free hand to push up his shirt sleeve, exposing the underside of his forearm. He's pale and lithe and her scarlet lipstick stains his skin beautifully as she scrawls her number across the canvas of his arm. “For emergencies only,” River instructs, eyes as impish as the curl in her cheeks, but he’s already nodding far too enthusiastically.

“Right. Yeah. Definitely.” He swallows around the agreement, a nervous tongue snaking out to wet his lips.

His voice is low and she can't be sure if her nearness inspires fear or desire to tickle up the back of his neck. Regardless, she signs her message with a kiss, a red X on ivory skin, and if she lingers long enough to apply the same shade to her lips, she'll never admit it's because she's running out of excuses to stay. River can feel his expectant eyes locked on her as she recaps her lipstick and places it in her bag, and it's only when she finally meets his eyes again that she realizes why.

Hopeful and laced with faintest hint of insecurity, he asks, “Don’t you want mine?”

He means his phone number and River's brow arches, knowing and playful. "And what sort of emergency would I need your number for?"

He straightens, shrugging coolly as he drawls out, "The dinner kind." He sways into her space like a co-conspirator, eyes glinting like they do when he's about to offer all of time and space. "I've been
known to make a mean fry up."

Somehow he manages to make beans on toast sound almost as tempting as spiral galaxies and nebulas. River simply hums, turning him down if only because she loves the way he chases her. "I'm not sure I trust you around hot grease."

"Half the fun is taking your life into your own hands." His eyebrows wiggle and there's mischief in those deceptively sweet brown eyes.

River laughs, because he doesn't know just how true that is, that she flirts with disaster on a daily basis, that she leaps from rooftops for the cheap thrill of the wind on her face. "I'm not sure food was the kind of crisis I had in mind."

"It ought to be," he choke out a mirthful sound. "I just tasted your robots cooking." A bubble of laughter escapes her lips again and before she can protest, he's reaching into his pocket and pulling out a business card.

She doesn't need it; she knows the number by heart. And yet she finds herself surrendering, taking the small card with a pitiful amount of complaint. John Smith is written in bold print and maybe that's the catalyst she needed, because River takes her first step back, twisting the paper between her fingers. "This doesn't mean I'm going to call you."

But her eyes must be liars because all he does is grin. "Just as well. I hardly ever answer my phone."

It's more true than he knows, which only makes her continued steps backward all the more difficult. "I should go," she announces softly, halfheartedly. She should turn away before the sight of his smile can pull her back in, before she drags him into his shop and gives him more than just a phone number.

"Of course," his tongue complies, but his eyes are nothing but silent protest. They're a brand on her skin, hazel orbs still burning with unanswered questions, and when he bids her goodbye, his voice carries on the wind and settles in her chest like a ghost of days long past. "See you around, River Song."

It sounds like a warning or a promise or a far-flung hope. River's throat is tight, a hint of a plea in her tone as she says, "Stay out of trouble, John."
She turns away from him then, from the false name and how it seems to hang in the air like smog. But the corner of her eye catches how those mischievous lips of his stretch tighter, the corners curling in a way that makes her hearts flutter. "Don’t need to," he shouts after her. "I’ve got your number now."

His gaze feels like hot coals dragging across her back, but River continues onward, never looking back. She resists the urge to peek over her shoulder and steal one last glance at his raggedy clothes and tousled hair. She refuses to be undone by a boyish smile, never taking her eyes off her destination lest she abandon all pretense and run right back to his waiting arms. It isn’t until she rounds the corner, until she’s free of his piercing hazel eyes that she finally remembers how to breathe.

She finds her morning bus waiting for her as it always is, and as River boards, taking her usual seat, Glyn greets her with that bright, old man smile she’s come to adore so much. The crowded bus full of early morning commuters leaves little time for small talk with her driving companion. But the lack of conversation suits River just fine this morning. She’s lost in her own thoughts as the transport takes its standard route through the high street and down along the Bay.

There’s something to be said for routine, for turning corners and knowing exactly what to expect, for waking up and knowing she won’t be alone. She hears his voice before she even realizes its morning. His lips hover just above her hip, breath ghosting across her skin in a way that makes her want to squirm. But the sweet nothings on his tongue aren’t exactly a lover’s caress. He doesn’t mean to seduce, and the kisses he drops just beneath her bellybutton aren’t meant to make her writhe. He’s cooing about black holes and ice moons rather than wanton intent. Stories of bedtimes and bubble baths have replaced promises of pleasure. His mouth so close to her skin doesn’t inspire the heat it once did, but she’d be a liar to say her hearts didn’t swell with sudden, undeniable warmth.

Eyes still closed and voice groggy, River sighs out, "Sweetie, we talked about this."

"You're asleep," he whispers back. "It doesn't count."

It’s too early to explain to him all the ways in which that sentence is flawed, so River settles for a deliberate huff, cracking open one eye to glare at him disapprovingly. "It can't hear you."

"He," the Doctor corrects. "And of course he can."

"It's been two weeks. It doesn’t even have a face yet."
The Doctor's hand settles over her stomach as if to cover their spawn's nonexistent ears. "You can't just tell someone they don't have a face, River. It's rude."

River's clever fingers snake down her abdomen, capturing his wrist. In one smooth motion, she pushes him back into the bed, pinning his hands beside his head, her legs straddling his hips. "You won't have a face if you wake me up talking to my stomach again."

His expression pinches, weighing her threat before he smirks and declares, "Rubbish. You like my face too much."

"I like my beauty sleep more." River shifts, bringing her lips down to brush against his. The Doctor cranes his neck to meet her like he's been waiting for this since the moment she drifted off to sleep. She can't help but deepen the kiss, and her hair slides off her shoulders, framing their faces like a curtain. Nothing exists outside of these warm sheets. Nothing is more important than this moment, this kiss. His prisoner wrists flex beneath her palms because the only longing between them now is his how his fingers ache to bury in her hair. The only script they have to follow is the one they've set themselves. The only promise left to be kept is this one- no matter where they fall asleep, they always wake up with a kiss.

Her lips still tingle from mornings spent tangled up in sheets, from cat naps in the TARDIS library roused by the feel of kisses dropped delicately on her forehead. She isn't quite sure how she's managed to make it through these last six months without their good morning ritual, how she coped with having such sweet bliss snatched away almost without warning and replaced by public transport and waking up alone. Glyn isn't exactly the taxi service she's accustomed to and stale donuts in the conference room don't compare to breakfast in bed. And yet, all things considered, it's more tolerable than she ever thought it would be.

Without her consent, the Hub has become her home away from home. It waits for her like a haven and before she knows it, she's exiting the bus and marching up the pier, past the run-down signs, and through the shabby wooden door. No one greets her as she enters, and though Ianto is vacant from his usual spot, she spots his coat hanging over the back of his chair. There's no sign of the rest of the team and River makes sure to announce herself as she enters the complex. It's been a lovely morning and she'd hate to spoil it by walking in on Jack and Ianto. Again.

As it turns out, she needn't have bothered because as River reaches the control room, she finds Ianto stationed at the computers, engrossed in his work. "Jack's upstairs," he offers dryly, without ever turning around.

"Morning to you, too," River snarks, chalking the icy reception up to a busy morning rather than a lover's quarrel. The office is barren save for him, which means the rest of the team is either late or already out on a job. Either way, she leaves him to his work, the soles of her shoes tapping softly
against metal as she makes her way up the stairs toward Jack's office.

She spots him first, draping herself against the doorway and waiting to be noticed. "Knock, knock," she greets, and Jack spins in his chair, eyes already bright at the sound of her voice. The crease in his brow speaks of fatigue, but his keen gaze is still sharp and perceptive as ever.

"You're looking suspiciously chipper," her friend observes, a wry smile inching up his cheeks. "Did you pinch something on the way to work today?"

River places a delicate hand to her chest, faux scandal written in wide, doe eyes. "A girl never steals and tells."

The smirk on his face could rival a Cheshire cat as he tsks and says, "All work and no play makes River a dull girl."

"And all flirt and no facts puts Jack on River's naughty list," she counters sweetly, the rebuttal said through a smile barring far too many teeth.

"Are there spankings involved?" he queries, immune to her threats. "If so, I'll definitely keep going."

River's eyes narrow, knowing he only flirts this blatantly when he's trying to distract her, either because he's got nothing to show for a night's work or because he's softening the blow of bad news. "Spill, Harkness," River demands, stepping into the room and taking a seat on the corner of his desk.

"Okay," he sighs, and he sounds like a man starved of sleep and witty conversation. "I was up all night, but I definitely found something. There was a large energy spike near the pub you were in last night," Jack explains, spinning in his chair to face the monitors once more. "It's a different signature to our usual flare ups. Man-made, if I had to take a guess."

River spots the anomaly the moment the data displays on the screen. One section of the map is lit up like a Christmas tree, and she leans over his shoulder to get a better look. "Are you saying someone intentionally ripped a hole in the rift?" Surprise and awe flow from her lips because that's reckless, that's absurd-

"That's exactly what I'm saying," Jack states, the same amount of alarmed reverence in his tone as he continues, "Now get a load of this. I dug a little deeper, looking into anything out of the ordinary,
and I found some strange fractures popping up all around the Doctor's vicinity."

A new map bursts to life on the monitor and River's jaw slackens to discover the highlighted areas are all places the Doctor has been. There's an infrared firework show surrounding his knitting class and the takeaway of which he's so fond. Even her block of flats is alight with residual energy. River swallows against a lump in her throat that tastes vaguely of panic.

"Is it them?" Jack asks, something wary and cold infecting his tone.

River takes control of the mouse, clicking and zooming, desperate to find anything that may provide insight. The signals are strongest around the places he frequents, but it's speckled up and down streets, too. It trails down side roads and along the river and into alleyways. It strays into places the Doctor claims to never have been. "No," River decides, shaking her head slowly, shrewd eyes scanning the screen. "It's too random to be them. I definitely don't trust it, though."

"I've seen a few of these fractures pop up here and there over the past few weeks," Jack explains. "But it's Cardiff, so I didn't think much of it. But when I noticed the TARDIS herself giving off some strange energy, I knew it couldn't be a coincidence."

At his warning, River zooms into the map, narrowing in on the Old Girl. Jack's right, the ship and the surrounding area are speckled with quantum residue. River's brow pinches in confusion because, "It doesn't make any sense. She looks fine."

"From the outside, maybe," Jack shrugs. "You need to get in there and take a look."

"The interior is fine, too." River dismisses him quickly, too distracted to realize her mistake until the words have left her lips and settled in the air.

Jack catches her slip, of course, brow furrowing and eyeing her suspiciously as he asks, "How do you know?" River's answer stalls in her throat for only a moment, but it's enough. At her silence, her friend's expression softens into wry intrigue. "Did you take him home last night?"

River squares her shoulders, a subconscious defense. Attention now determinedly focused on the readings, she hums out, "No, he stayed at mine."

"I'll bet he did." Jack grins, the curl of his lips decidedly more lecherous.
River rolls her eyes. "Grow up, Jack. It's not like that."

"I'm not judging," he declares, palms out even as a knowing smirk claims him. "A little jealous, maybe."

"Of whom, exactly?"

"Both."

River lets out an exasperated sigh, "Not to ruin your dirty thoughts, but we just slept." The denial is bland and bitter and she suppresses a shudder from the very core of her being, from a rather southerly part of her that wishes she was, indeed, lying.

Beside her, Jack exhales his sympathies. "If you didn’t take him home, how do you know about the TARDIS?"

"I may have…” River hesitates, a wiggle in her shoulders as she feigns innocence. "Popped in once."

Jack grins, but lets the admission slide, for now at least. "So assuming it's not the TARDIS, what else could be giving off these readings?"

"Solar storm?" River shrugs at her own halfhearted suggestion. "Temporal flares, maybe?"

"Or," Jack cuts in, a daunting chill in his voice, and River prays to any deity who may be listening that he doesn’t say- "the Fob watch."

_Damnit._ River's chest deflates, releasing the breath that had been keeping a ball of anxiety at bay. She’d been intentionally neglecting that particular hypothesis because, “The only reasons it would put off any energy signatures are if it was open or damaged in some way.”

“Maybe he dropped it?”
River's eyes cut to her friend, leveling him with an unamused glare. “It’s hardly an iPhone, Jack.” Unlike Apple products, it’s built to last.

The man beside her leans back in his chair, arms folded across his lap as he stares up at her. “Best case scenario, it’s nothing but some solar residue. But,” he hesitates then, and as he inhales, preparing his next words, all her worst nightmares come to life behind her eyes. "Worst case, the watch is cracked. Bits of his conscious could be leaking out all over Cardiff."

River shuts her eyes against the torrent of images Jack's theory births. A deep breath fills her lungs and when she opens her eyes anew, she finds them straying toward the shabby brick wall, imagining the city beyond. Their one hope is bound within a clock that isn't meant to tick. His true self was meant to be safe there. To think it could be broken, that he could be crying out to her for help and she doesn't even know it makes her inside churn and boil. The room feels small, claustrophobic, the air heavy and stagnant. It tastes like ash in a dimly-lit cave, the red bricks a poor recreation of scarlet robes. There's so much out there that she can't control, and she feels as if she's drowning in all the things for which she can't prepare.

“We need to know if it's coming from the watch," she reiterates, her stern voice a disguise against how truly helpless she feels. "How quickly can you find out?"

“I'd need to run tests on it to be sure," Jack states effortlessly and River arches a condescending brow.

“And how do you propose we do that?"

"Ask," he suggests flippantly. "Who knows? Maybe he'd give it to us."

"No," River declares, and the singular word is a scoff or a laugh because it’s utterly hilariously and positively out of the question. “Absolutely not. Under no circumstances can he know about the watch. You know as well as I do that if he knows about it, he'll open it.” Doctor or not, he's still him, and he never could resist anything that tasted vaguely of temptation.

Jack leans forward in his chair, leaning a casual elbow on his desk. "You could always steal it."

There a twitching smirk gracing her old friend's lips, and as much as she relishes such a devious suggestion, "I wouldn't even know where to look."
“Strip search,” he offers, grin broadening, and River fixes him with a lackluster frown. At her resistance, Jack tries again, as tender as he is persuasive. "Listen, I'm not saying you have to break any headboards, just have a look around the TARDIS, sneak in while he's out if you have to."

River pulls her bottom lip between her teeth, because she could. It’d be easy enough. Besides, it’s better than any of her previous flimsy excuses to see him. But before she can agree, her conscience takes control of her tongue, protesting, “I’m supposed to be staying away from him.”

“No,” Jack amends, "you’re supposed to be protecting him. There’s someone out there tearing holes in the rift and hunting anything extraterrestrial that’s unlucky enough to fall through. And we both know nothing screams alien like a Time Lord's essence trapped in a fob watch."

It’s a terrifying prospect, and what's worse is, he's right. Even if they manage to neutralize the current threat, they can’t let the Doctor continue to leave an energy trail all over the city. With a signature like that, he'll be a magnet for monsters and aliens. He may as well carry a neon sign reading buffet, because it's only a matter of time before someone or something comes sniffing around.

That is, if someone hasn't noticed already.

A small nod is all River offers in the form of agreeance, changing the subject to equally pressing matters as she says, "That Maddie girl, did you find anything on her?"

Jack shakes his head, an impassive shrug to his shoulders. "Nothing yet. Not much I can do without a last name or a DNA sample."

"CCTV?"

"We tried that. Kept losing her to the crowd on the High street."

Pursing her lips, River gives a determined nod. "Get Gwen to tail her."

"River," Jack begins delicately, and she knows by the tone of his voice what protests will follow. "Don’t you think you’re overreacting just a bit? You don’t want to scare the daylights outta some girl just because she might have a crush on her boss."
"Don't I?" River mutters under her breath, before taming the venom in her tone and turning to Jack with an intentionally blank expression. "If she’s just *some* girl, she won’t have anything to hide."

"Fine," Jack concedes. "I'll have her followed." His words dangle in the air, sharp eyes watching her carefully, and River feels the qualifier on his promise before it ever leaves his lips. "But," he continues, choosing his next words wisely. "If it's nothing, if she's just a normal girl, you have to leave her alone."

River pins him in place with emerald green eyes, a silent challenge as she holds his gaze. A heartbeat or two passes before she accepts his terms. "I won't terrify her too much," River concedes, holding up her trigger finger and blinking at him innocently as she purrs, "Assassin's honour."

Jack nods his acquiescence, lips parting, some other observation hot on his tongue when-

"There's been another murder," Ianto announces, mobile pressed firmly to his ear and an urgency to his step as he peaks into the room. Moment shattered, River and Jack's attentions drift back to one another. His eyes are as stoic and hardened as hers. For a moment, he's as ancient as the man she married, just as untouched by death as the Doctor himself. It might be the most telling thing about her, the fact that she finds solace in the company of men like them, men unfazed by things that make mere mortals crumble. She wonders what he sees in her, if it's like looking in a mirror. They reach for their guns in unison, finding comfort in cold metal. Jack's eyes find hers once more, a beautifully crafted balance of curiosity and indifference written in the soft lines around his mouth. He nods once, a blunt signal to leave, all River's fleeting thoughts confirmed as they turn, heading out the door in search of a corpse.
Messages and Monsters

Chapter Summary

Blood that isn't quite crimson stains the concrete floor. River forgets all about the fresh air she's been hoarding in her lungs. The sight before her hits her square in the chest, ripping away any oxygen she may have stowed. She's dizzy, but not from gore. The sickness in her stomach comes from a source far worse.

“You heeded not our warnings and you can no longer turn back, but the path ahead is strewn with danger, to you, and to those who travel with you. This is but the beginning.” - K.J. Wignall

It's only fitting that it's raining, that the moon has been eclipsed by ominous clouds, her only light source the manufactured glow of street lamps and the occasional passing car. Cold gusts of wind rattle naked trees, sheets of icy spray pounding against her coat. River pulls her hood tighter around her face, watching as soggy leaves, the last evidence of autumn, collect along the gutters as torrents of rain water gather and stream down the winding streets of Cardiff.

If River didn’t know any better, she’d say Mother Nature herself was protesting their decision, the universe already setting in motion ways to push them back together. Causality is always pushing and pulling them in one direction or another. Usually, River would be grateful for any omens that put her lover in her path, but fate only ever seems to want them together when circumstances demand they be apart.

As it is, every step she takes leads her further and further away from the man she calls husband and the ship she calls home. They parked the Old Girl in an alley between two shops and disguised her as a second-hand store, the console room secreted and tucked away in the back of a storage cupboard he’ll never think to enter. With mournful hearts, River had set their ship to standby, locked the door behind her, and walked away from the two things she’s always held most dear.

She left him behind, left him alone in their bed, practically comatose after the change. It hadn’t been easy, turning her back on him when he looked so helpless. His exhausted eyes were plagued by purple rings, the rhythm of his breathing a lethargic chore. He looked weak and sickly and so, so
human. She wanted nothing more than to curl up beside him until warmth radiated from his skin once again. But she refrained from placing her head upon his shoulder; she didn't dare delight in the rise and fall of his chest. She resisted for entirely selfish reasons, because she didn't want to feel the echo of a single lonely heart. Instead, she ran her hand through his hair one last time. Despite his change, those brown locks were still soft and thick between her fingers. He still let out a warm hum at the feel of her affections, and even though he doesn't know her, somehow, it's enough.

It has to be because his new life is waiting for him on the bedside table. With Jim’s help, they forged all the documents he might need, everything from a birth certificate to business cards. The fob watch sits atop the fallacies like the crown of all lies. In the morning he’ll wake up a new man with the same face, a single heart and a fake life, a head full of facts and memories that never were. Even as she marches her way down the gloomy Cardiff streets, she can see that watch as clearly as if it were in front of her now. Her longing eyes had drifted to it many times while she was pacing about their bedroom, plucking up the courage to finally walk out the door. It felt more like him than the man she tucked into bed, but she refrained from touching it, from stroking her fingers against it the way she would his jawline. She resisted temptation under the oath of her promise- stay away from direct exposure to time energy, including the watch, the TARDIS, and her trusty vortex manipulator. And so she’s betrayed her instinct to linger by his bedside until the color returned to his cheeks. She left, because now was a good a time as any to start expressing self-control.

After all, she’ll need to become accustomed to such practices if she plans on making it the next nine months trapped in this universal dumping ground of a city. Her stomach is still flat; tiny feet have yet to kick inside her womb, no lump hiding beneath her shirt to serve as reminder for her cause. All she has for a souvenir is morning sickness, that could just as easily be caused by nerves. River’s never felt so alone. Maybe that’s why her feet have carried her so quickly in this direction. It’s company she seeks, a friendly face to keep her feet firmly planted on the ground.

The Hub is around here somewhere, hidden cleverly out of sight. She knows because on many occasions Jack has mentioned, or should she say bragged, about his secret entrance near the Roald Dahl Plass. The help of her sonic makes it all too easy to find, tracking the TARDIS' unique energy signature back to a rather scenic little spot in front of the Water Tower. Temporal residue sits on the brick the Old Girl once landed on like a tattoo on space time, and River can’t help but shake her head fondly. He did like to leave a mark, her husband. The air around the small cube tastes like a perception filter, like buzzing neutrinos kissed by a chameleon circuit. She sees through it, of course, one of the perks of having a dimensionally transcendental mummy.

A few more scans from her sonic reveal a firewall, a security system to boot, and even a remote deadbolt locking mechanism. Bless, River thinks, chuckling to herself as she breezes past their security with ease. Stepping onto the slab, River waits. After a moment, the sound of grinding gears fill her ears as the ground beneath her gives a small shudder and then lowers. Descending from the heavens wasn’t exactly what she had in mind, but she did so love to make an entrance.

The highly unsafe lift begins to lower, giving her a birds eye view of their underground lair. To her dismay, River finds the Hub empty. Or at least it appears to be. When the lift comes to a stand still,
she removes her hood, casually tossing her drenched coat over the rail like the hideaway has been hers along. She made a habit of entering rooms as if she owned them. It made it all the easier should she decide to conquer or loot or excavate. Chin held high, River steps off the platform and into the room, finding computers are unmanned, desks empty. She passes an office and what appears to be a board room and she’s almost given up hope of finding anyone when she hears it. A loud bang reverberates from down the hall, and River follows the sound like a sailor after a siren song. It leads her past a medical bay and a morgue, down a dark corridor that was once a dungeon or a sewer.

When she rounds the corner, River finds Jack and a handful of others standing over a heap of fur and chains. A closer look tells her it’s a creature of some description, a rather violent looking one at that. River holds her tongue, relaxing against the doorway and silently observing as the group squabbles over how best to get the animal into a body bag. She’s about to clear her throat and introduce herself when the creature bursts to life, shattering the chains. Chunks of metal fly across the room, colliding with dull stone. It’s teeth are barred, black holes for eyes zeroing in on Jack. Instinctually, the entire team leaps into action, the Captain himself reaching for his weapon. Claws flex to swipe, a roar gurgling in the beast’s throat.

River puts a hole between creature’s eyes before the others can even let out a warning shout. It crumples at their feet, defeated with a single shot. The occupants of the room turn towards the door, aghast and alert, guns aimed at her in shock and terror. Four pairs of eyes are trained on her, staring onward like she’s a Fury or a Medusa or the goddess Eris herself. River remains where she is, propped against the doorframe. Nonchalant lips purse, blowing the smoke from the barrel of her gun. Dexterous fingers spin the weapon, putting on a show, before sheathing it safely in her holster.

Jack is grinning, lips stretched so wide she fears his face will crack from sheer joy, but it’s a man in a lab coat who pipes up first, “Hands in the air or I’ll take you out.”

Her eyes wash over him, noting his weedy frame and sharp pointy features. “Not likely,” she scoffs at his threat. He wasn’t taking her anywhere, in any sense of the word. Derisive eyes no longer gracing him with her attention, River’s gaze drifts to a rather feisty looking brunette. She has big doe eyes and a capable looking trigger finger. River’s lips twitch, intrigued. “You on the other hand...”

The girl blinks, not sure if she should be terrified or flattered. “Jack, do you know her?”

Jack snorts out a laugh, grinning from ear to ear. “Know her? She’s shot me on at least four occasions.”


They’ve lowered their weapons, some more hesitantly than others. River’s eyes roam back to the
dark-haired girl, finding that those brown orbs have grown exponentially in size at this revelation.

Another man in a fitted suit pipes up, a high-pitched squeak in his incredulous question, “Did you break in here?”

River’s smirk deepens like the mischievous nymph she is, all smug confidence and zero remorse. “You should see me on a good day.”

“Everyday I see you is a good day,” Jack chimes in, that devilish charm dialed up to its maximum setting.

He closes the space between them, a skip in his usual swagger. River responds just as playfully, swatting at his chest, “Stop it, you’ll make a girl blush.”

“You? Blush? Not likely.” His arms fold around her in a friendly embrace. River reciprocates, wrapping around his solid frame. He’s warm and familiar and he crackles like an anomaly against her part Time Lord skin. After a moment, he pulls back, not quite releasing her from his grasp as he asks, “So what do I owe the pleasure?”

“Oh, I assure you,” River purrs, batting her greenest eyes. “The pleasure’s all mine.”

Her old friend’s head tilts suspiciously, a twitch in the corner of his mouth, “Are you sweet talking me, Song?”

“Is it working?” River counters, her teasing tone reflected in Jack’s sea blue eyes.

“Always.”

She gives a throaty laugh, all too aware of the audience watching them quizzically.

“Sorry to interrupt,” the weedy man snarks out. “Care to tell us what the hell is going on?”

“Should I tell them?” Jack asks, a secretive glint in his eyes.
River offers a playful wiggle, a parody of coyness as she cuts her eyes to the side and shrugs, “Go on then.”

“This is my team,” he explains, pride tugging at the corner of his cheek as he turns to face the other occupants, introducing them on by one. “Gwen, police liaison; Owen, medicine man; Toshiko, tech support; Ianto, eye-candy.” The man in the suit blushes, and Jack tosses him a wink before he turns back to River, something exciting and enigmatic in his tone as he continues, “Team, this is River Song, assassin, archaeologist, general rabble rouser, and very dear friend of mine. Mark the day folks, meeting her is, well, almost as good as meeting me.”

“Jack, darling,” River coos, offering a small wave to the collective group before cutting her eyes back to her old friend. “If your ego gets any bigger, we’ll have to get it its own parsec.”

“Speaking of ego,” Jack chimes, gaze drifting over her shoulder expectantly. “Where is the old ball and chain of yours, anyway?”

It reeks of death, of freshly decaying flesh and burnt neutrinos. The air is still crisp, the rift licking at its wounds after being unceremoniously ripped open. Every inhale feels like swallowing static, and to make matters worse, a fine mist of rain has begun to seep from the sky and onto the fresh corpses. The Torchwood team had to quarantine the neighboring streets and spread a rumor about a busted pipe line just to cover the smell. His team operates with an admirable level of detached efficiency. It's a bit unnerving to see how desensitized they are, to realize that, like Jack and herself, they too have seen far too many horrors to be phased by a few alien corpses. Trying her best not to breath too deeply, River stares down at the bodies before her. The remains of two particularly massive Canintiles occupy the small expanse of the alley way, but the taste of I told you so just begging to fall from her lips just might be sweet enough to make the foul odor tolerable.

She knew they never traveled in threes.

The slightly larger of the two beasts is sprawled out across the asphalt. It's jaw hangs limply from its skull, revealing razor sharp teeth that are coated in yellow decay. Massive paws give way to protruding dagger-like claws, it's hindlegs coiled beneath it, prepared for a strike that never came. A large hole seared into the belly of the beast stands as testament to the creatures demise. It’s a clean kill, a single well-aimed shot to the abdomen stopping it dead in its tracks. The wound is a violent
one, charred and black, branding straight through rough scales and muscle and bone. One hardly has
to be an expert to notice the lesion is a peculiar one, from an anachronistic weapon, no doubt. No
shotgun or semiautomatic could have done it. This was something far deadlier, and judging by the
accuracy in which it was wielded, whoever was using it knew what they were doing.

"Do you recognize it?" Jack asks, gesturing to the mark scarring the scale like flesh.

With burns like that, it could be anything from an Isometric laser cannon to a Hectian scalding ray.
Truth be told, she’s always been far better at poisons than blasters. “Can’t say I do," River admits
with a sigh.

“Whatever caused it, the lacerations match that of the last victim,” Owen explains, still poking
around, examining the entry wound. “I’d be willing to bet it’s the same gun.”

River circles the body, searching for fresh perspective. Judging by its positioning, it looks as if the
poor creature barely made it through the tear in the rift before it was neutralized. Glancing around,
she notes that there’s nothing to hide behind in the desolate alley, the only means of possible cover a
beaten up garbage bin. Apart from the victims, the alley is barren, bleak, and unassuming. Concrete
walls four stories high surround the crime scene on three sides, and River can’t help but notice that
it’s the perfect place to not be seen. But it also means there’s only one way out.

"What does CCTV have on the entrance of the alleyway?" River asks, and Jack is already shaking
his head.

"Nada," her friend sighs out. “It was the first thing I had Ianto look into.”

“They had to have gotten in here somehow.” River's hand rises to her forehead, shielding her eyes as
they scan the towering roofline. “Think they teleported?”

“It’s hard to say,” a few paces away, Toshiko speaks up, nose practically pressed into her equipment
as if by invading it’s space all its secrets will be revealed. “I’m getting too many readings off the
excess rift energy. This is definitely where it opened, though. No doubt about that. I reckon whoever
tore this hole got more than they bargained for.”

“Taking these out must have been enough to scare the others away,” Gwen theorizes, rounding the
beast in an attempt to find a potential line of fire.
“No,” the correction falls off River’s lips in a long contemplative breath. “That’s not how Canintiles operate. Once they’ve got your scent, they’ll just keep coming.”

“Well not these, apparently,” Owen snorts, now elbow deep in the creature's secretions. Prodding inside the beast in search of evidence only seems to add to the horrid smell. River makes an effort not to breathe through her nose lest the putrid stench imbed itself in her senses forever. She wants to walk away, to breathe air that isn’t rancid, but something isn’t right. It doesn’t make sense until she sees a distinctive scar across the back of the creature's scaly hide.

“Unless,” River tilts her head, crouching down to inspect her finding. Her son protests the movement, stretching and kicking against the even more confined space of her womb. One hand pats at her stomach in an attempt to placate him while the other gestures toward the body. “Look at the marks on the shoulder blades. These were the alphas.” Green eyes trace the long healed carvings, joyless reverence on her tongue as she explains, "I think these two were killed on purpose so the murderer could take control of the others and send them out to hunt.”

Gwen has come to stand by her side, the girl’s wide eyes blinking, her Welsh accent almost grating as she voices River's greatest fears, “But to know all that, they’d have to be a-”

“Time traveler, yeah,” River finishes the thought for her. Somehow it hurts less when there’s at least one thing she can control. Standing upright, River pivots toward Jack, pinning him in place with eyes as sharp as daggers. “Still think it’s a coincidence she left the pub early?”

Her old friend is about to argue or agree or refute her claim entirely. She'll never know for sure because before his jaw can slack, a voice summons them to the other side of the alley. "You might want to come have a look at this," Ianto calls out, face pale and eyes locked on the asphalt.

Eyes still locked with Jacks, River steps past her friend and heads toward the second corpse. Gwen is behind her instantly, and after a moment of silence, Jack's coat can be heard flapping in the breeze as he follows after. The second victim is slightly smaller than the first and abundantly more rank. Where the larger beast has been a clean kill, this one appears as if it's already been dissected. The underbelly has been ripped open in a grisly display, an act done post mortem if she had to guess. Maroon colored blood has coagulated on the ground, and River steps over what might have been its spleen as she makes her way to Ianto, holding her breath until she's upwind of the gruesome scene.

He's quite the site, squatting in garbage while dressed in a finely pressed suit. One hand covers his nose and mouth and the other holds up a filthy tarp that must have blown out of the bin. River isn't sure what she expects to find, perhaps the murder weapon or a scrap of torn clothing. At best a calling card and at worst a melted lump of trash he’s mistaken for alien tech. Whatever it is she expected to see, when she finally reaches his side, it isn't this.
Blood that isn't quite crimson stains the concrete floor. River forgets all about the fresh air she's been hoarding in her lungs. The sight before her hits her square in the chest, ripping away any oxygen she may have stowed. She's dizzy, but not from gore. The sickness in her stomach comes from a source far worse. When she breathes in again, her whole mouth tastes foul and metallic, like wet garbage and blood and the words-

*You can’t hide forever. The clock is ticking.*

River stares down at the ominous warning, ice swimming in her veins, rage and terror thundering in her ears, her voice grave but remarkably steady as she asks, “Have there been messages like this on the other bodies?”

“No, this is the first one,” Gwen answers, quietly, carefully, as she squats down to collect a sample.

River watches, jaw tight, face made of stone, eyes unwilling or unable to look anywhere else until, “I want that girl followed, do you understand me?” Even to herself she sounds like rolling thunder, like the bubbling of magma, and when she finally looks away from the foreboding messages, leaden eyes fall on Jack, rattling off her demands. “I want the TARDIS under constant surveillance. No one goes near it without a facial recognition scan and a background check.”

A gentle hand finds purchase on her elbow as Jack begins to lead her away from any prying ears. “Don’t you think we’re a little past tightening security?” he asks in hushed tone, the heat from his breath dancing on the wind. River extracts herself from his grasp, spine stiffening as he suggests, “Maybe it’s time to rethink the plan, go somewhere, get out of Cardiff and—“

“Hide?” River scoffs, incredulous anger directed at no one in particular. “Where? If they can find us in the midst of this, she clips, gesturing to the invisible remnants of rift energy thickening the air around them, “they’ll find us anywhere.”

“River,” Jack pleads, keeping his scolding tone low. "This is blatantly for you.-“

“Don’t you think I know that?” River snaps, and if there’s panic fraying the edges of her voice, only Jack’s around to hear it. It’s obvious what this is, a challenge, a threat. But to uproot everything, to wake him up, is an unnecessary risk. “Of course it's for me, for us. But now is not the time for drastic measures.” She's too close, come too far. She needs to think her next move through carefully. Jack runs a hand through his perfectly sculpted hair, a sigh on his lips as he scans the surrounding alley. River interprets the action as concession. With a deep, calming breath, she reasons, “This isn’t the
first murder, only the first message. So what’s changed?”

After a moment of careful consideration, Jack’s eyes widen, finding her once again. “You spoke to him.”

“Maybe that scared them. If they know we’re onto them, this could be a trap. What would they have to gain by baiting us if not to scare us into running?”

Jack’s already shaking his head before she’s even finished her thought. “But why go on a killing spree in the first place if it’s him they’re after?”

“Practice?” River shrugs, and Jack's lips purse, unconvinced.

“Doesn’t seem like a smart move, telling your victim you’re coming.”

“As soon as I knew you were coming, I tidied up a bit.” They orbit around one another like colliding stars. Melody’s not sure who’s the cat and who’s the mouse. Between the gun and fruit, he’s had ample time to leave, to jump ship, to run. She’s not entirely sure why she’s hesitating, why she’s humoring him with the song and dance, why she’s bothering with poison lips when she could have ended it all in the cornfield, when she could have put a bullet between his eyes and have done with it.

“Unless you want them to run,” River reiterates, swallowing a lump in her throat that tastes like experience and bad memories.

“Someone's trying to scare you out of Cardiff?” Jack surmises, but his brow is pinched, the pages not stacking up. “What would they have to gain from that? And if it is this girl working with him, why is she bothering with all this when she’s already right under the Doctor’s nose?”

His wording makes her synapses fire, a bright light in a dark room as it all clicks into place and River’s lips part, revelation on her tongue. “Because it’s not the Doctor’s nose.”

Jack follows in her footsteps, their train of thought syncing, eyes widening as he breathes, “She wants the watch.”
“Or for him to open it.” Their gaze is locked but River’s thoughts are far away, racing with who’s and why’s. Her pulse quickens and the baby gives a kick and a buzzing in her handbag nearly startles her out of her skin, making her give a sharp inhale. A moment of calm chases her surprise until it occurs to her that everyone with this number is here. Everyone except-

Anxious fingers dive for her mobile, and when she finds the TARDIS’ number flashing on the screen, River answers immediately, a knot in her throat as her words fall out in a panicked rush, “What’s wrong? Where are you? John?”

Her trepidation must alarm him because there’s silence, only static to fill the airways before he finally gathers himself enough to blurt out, “Nothing!” The sound of his voice makes River’s pounding hearts steady. It’s the Doctor that’s now infected with shaky nerves, hesitating as he continues, “I just, uh, how did you know it was me?”

A silent, relieved sigh falls from her lips, all her worry vacating her body in one heavy breath. Turning away from Jack and his team, River whispers into the phone, equal parts exasperated and relieved as she ignores his question entirely, “I told you this is for emergencies only.”

“It is an emergency!” he counters just a bit too quickly, swallowing. “Sort of. Last night I was looking for the loo and I couldn’t help but notice-“

"Snooping around my house, were you?” River arches a playful brow, scolding him through the phone.

"Not intentionally." The man on the other end of the line gives a bashful chuckle, shrugging away her accusations. "Listen, I was wondering, have you picked out colors yet? For the baby’s room?"

River blinks, lips parting in surprise, and for a moment it feels like the whole world is standing still. It hasn’t exactly been at the top of her priority list and she certainly hadn’t been expecting anyone to take notice, least of all him. Holding her chin higher than the tide of her own shortcomings, River’s voice is more brittle than she means it to be when she confesses, "No, why?"

“I was thinking,” he begins, and through the phone, she can hear him lick his lips, hear the shuffle of tweed on a cotton shirt. “I could help you pick them out, paint too, if you’ll have me.”

She doesn’t know what to say, too stunned for words. The thought of being with him, of picking out paint cans and curtains, of finishing all the things they never got to do feels like an offer that’s too
good to be true. Watching a him that isn’t him choose between yellow or blue sounds like the most painful torture she’s ever endured.

And she must be silent for just a little too long, because between the static and the raindrops, she hears him clear his throat and add, “Pregnant women shouldn't be around fumes, you know. But I could, you know, as a thank you, for saving me.”

There’s a smile on his face, sheepish and hopeful. She can tell by the way his carefully crafted words roll off his nervous tongue. River tells herself that it has nothing to do with what comes next, that it’s his need to be protected that makes her concede and say, “Yes. I’d love to.”

“Really?” It’s more a high-pitched squeak than it is a question, but he schools himself quickly, clearing his throat. “I mean, excellent. Knew you’d say yes. Is tomorrow alright?”

River’s eyes gravitate to the corpse, to the message smeared in alien blood. The sickly sight of it makes her mouth go dry, and the need to be by his side, to keep him safe at all costs must take over because before she knows it, her too-bright voice is offering, “Why wait? Let’s go now.”

The Doctor laughs, delighted and eager and miles away from the rank, grey alley in which she stands. “Can’t, I’m afraid,” he declines and the remorse in his voice bleeds into her hearts, stealing her smile. “Gave my assistant the day off.”

“Oh?” Interest peaked, River finds her gaze subconsciously traveling to the entrance of the alley way, skirting along the roofline of the concrete walls. “Where is she today?”

“Facebooking, I think. Or was it scrapbooking? One of those young people things.” There’s a flippancy in his indifferent tone as he shrugs her question away. In the breath she takes, preparing to inquire further, he’s already moved on, too focused on her to be bothered with anything else. “But tomorrow? I could pick you up at yours?”

“Don't be silly,” a laugh that’s almost genuine bubbles up, throaty and inviting, and if her wiles persuade him to agree so she can cross paths with his assistant once again, so be it. “I’ll meet you at your shop. How does 11am sound?”

"Like a dream," he breathes, malleable as ever when it comes to giving her what she wants.
It’s enough to put a smile on River’s face, one not even the dreary weather can wash away. Given the sudden escalation of water now pooling at her feet, she thinks it just might be trying. Grey clouds above have only grown darker and River tips her head back, rain drops catching on the apples of her cheeks as a rumble of thunder echoes in the distance. It makes her think of her caves and black obsidian and the way his hands have settled on her hips like they belong there, like they’ve been there a thousand times before. Stevie Wonder echoes off glittering walls and her eyes are far away, focused on a spot just beyond his shoulder, remembering all the times she’s come here to think or scream or cry or be anything except what she’s expected to be. Now, half her life is missing and she’d give anything for a glimpse of who or what she is, where she fits in this infinite universe. Her memories have been stolen from her, lost for one reason or another. Even the man before her is forgotten; and yet, this place she recalls. His smile is as foreign to her as a distant sun and it hardly seems fair that something so beautiful could be erased while such vivid memories of her solitude remain.

"I don’t come here for the storms," she confesses, thinking of all the times she's raged against petrified glass, wishing like hell that her scars could be half as beautiful as the footprints lightning has left on this sand. She feels how his tempo slows, his feet keeping time with the cadence of her voice. "I come here to see what’s left behind after they pass, when everything looks cleaner and brighter in its wake."

The distant sounds of rolling thunder and gale force winds fill her ears, but she can't help but focus on anything but him and the steadying hand at the small of her back as he whispers, "And what will this storm leave behind?"

Her eyes drag their way to his like he's summoned her, like he lives or dies by the sound of her voice, like he is a god put on this earth to grant her every wish. "I won't know until it passes," she swallows, unsure of how to ask even if she knew what she wanted from this man, this friend that dropped out of the sky, who asks nothing from her except to let him stand by her side. And maybe that's why she brought him here, to this secret place. Maybe she's tired of being alone. "But if I had to guess, I'd say it could be something beautiful."

Lightning flashes, chased by thunder, and the Doctor must hear it through the phone because the next sound she hears is, “You shouldn’t be outside in this weather.”

The reprimand only succeeds in making her smirk deepen, because it’s hard to believe this is the same man that once sailed a flying submarine through an electromagnetic storm. Shedding herself of memories and taking a step past the bloodied corpse, River argues, “I should eat more vegetables, too, but what can I say? I’ve always been a bit of a rebel.”

She swears she can hear the way his nose crinkles at the mere mention of green food, a hypocrite through and through, as he continues to admonish her. "Rebellion is good for overthrowing empires, not the common cold."
“It’s Cardiff, sweetie,” River huffs out. “If I didn’t leave the house when it rained, I’d never go anywhere.”

“Well then, tomorrow I insist it be sunny.”

“Have some pull with the weather, do you?”

“I know a rain dance or two.” There’s a smirk in his teasing tone, and River bites her tongue against telling him that that isn’t how rain dances work. Nevertheless, even if she hadn’t resisted the ever-tempting offer to correct him, her facts would have gone unheard because a resounding crash steals his attentions. “Speaking of dancing, my toy section seems to have developed a fault.”

Even knowing she’ll see him tomorrow, it’s hard to let him go. She says her goodbyes anyway, mobile still pressed to her ear and the faintest hint of a smile clinging to corners of her mouth. "I better leave you to it, then."

She hears his lips part, goodbye on his tongue when another sudden clatter that sounds an awful lot like a Jack-in-the-box gone haywire, fills the air. In the background, all manner of chaos ensues, and the last thing River hears is the Doctor’s frantic squeak before the shop phone clatters to the floor. What follows can only be described as mayhem and the aftermath of what she believes to be him wrestling with a spring loaded army. With a shake of her head, River lowers the phone and ends the call. As it disconnects, so does she. The woman she was a moment ago has vanished. Gone are her soft expressions and throaty chuckles. She’s all business now. No longer lost in the sound of his voice, River finds herself thrust back into the grit of the now, of corpses and cryptic messages.

Jack is engrossed in a conversation with Gwen when River tucks her mobile into her bag, but both heads turn to her expectantly as she calls out, "Change of plans. You can't tail his assistant coz she's not at work today."

The look that befalls Jack's face tells her he's starting to come around to her suspicions as he asks, “Where is she?”

“He doesn’t know,” River states and it tastes like vindication. She bites back another I told you so, choosing instead to announce, "But luckily for you lot, I'll have served her up on a platter.” A smirk is plucking at the corner of her mouth, and it only grows with mischievous intent as she continues, "The Doctor is going to be out tomorrow, which means she'll be there. Alone."
"You want us to grab her?" Jack nods, and River shakes her head, contemplating.

"No, wait till she leaves and see where she goes. I want to know what she's been up to first."

Jack must sense her scheming thoughts because his arms fold over his chest, chin tilted and tone expectant. "And what about the Doctor? Where will he be?"

River takes a step back as if pulled by an otherworldly force. That same air of mystery weaves its way into her smile as she pulls her hood over her head and promises, "Leave him to me."

"Where are you going?" Jack calls after her, and if his brow is pinched in fond exasperation, she's sure he'll forgive her for leaving them to clean up this mess because-

"Shopping," River grins. "I have a date in the morning."

X

The next day finds her as all eagerly anticipated things do, not at all soon enough and never exactly as one expects. His rain dance must have been effective because it's the sunniest she's seen Cardiff in months. Her new boots click across a puddle-free sidewalk and her figure-hugging dress catches the eye of more than a few morning commuters. It's a far cry from the daring gowns and stilettos she once wore like battle armour, but it'll be enough to knock his fez off, so to speak. She thought she'd feel compelled to hide her ever-growing bump, that it would inspire questions she couldn’t answer. But the Doctor had surprised her, as he’s wont to do. He wasn’t at all discouraged by her current state. Even now, he wants to be with her. She sees it now in ways she never had before, that it’s never mattered if they were crashing a starship or saving a planet from plague or buying nappies. She’s always been an adventure in his eyes.

Maybe it's seeing him again so soon that makes her pulse skip. Maybe it's the fact that she loves breaking rules, especially his, that has her smiling as she marches past the coffee shop she used to frequent. She spares no lingering glances for the table at which she used to sit, where she watched from afar as he lived his life without her. Instead, she keeps her gaze locked on the wooden door that used to read _Pull to open_ as she heads straight for his shop.

The sun is at her back as she enters the building, and she must be a silhouette because his greeting, while kind, lacks the usual luster and warmth he always manages to save just for her. "'Ello, be right-
"the words catch on the tip of his tongue as he glances toward the door, doing a double take as she steps inside. "River," he breathes, and there's that smile she wanted to see, his eyes alight and curious as he sets down the gizmo he's repairing and rounds the counter to meet her. "What are you doing here?"

“Our date,” she reminds him, the door clicking closed behind her. River doesn't fight the gravity between them, the way she finds herself being pulled toward him, head tilted and brow arched. "Or am I so easily forgotten?"

There's a playful glint in her eyes even as she feigns offense, but the Doctor's hands fly up anyway, a clumsy attempt to keep her from fleeing as he quickly blurts out, "No, no. You're just early, is all."

"Afraid not," she corrects, eyes straying over his shoulder to the clock mounted on the wall. He follows her gaze, discovering it is, in fact, three minutes past the hour.

"Blimey," he swallows hard, Adam's apple bobbing, suddenly twitchy as he pats at his clothes and runs a hand through his unkempt hair, silently panicking. Bless him. He did so love to primp.

"Shall I come back later?"

"No," he snaps, and River's smirk deepens. "Don't be silly. I'll only be a mo," the Doctor schools himself, clumsy feet guiding him as he walks backwards toward the stairs. Nonsense has always been his greatest weapon and he utilizes it now, keeping his eyes on her as he makes his way up the steps, rambling about fixing this and dropping that and my how time flies when you have a new ball of yarn and a fresh bottle of glue, not to be used together of course. He pauses when he reaches the landing, popping his head around the corner to instruct, "Don't go anywhere." He bestows her with a grin before he departs, skipping away in a flourish, feet thundering against the stairs as he continues his ascent, out of sight when he shouts, "Make yourself at home!"

River shakes her head at the place he had been, watching with a fond smile. Now that she's older and they're liner, it's easier to see the humor in the fact that she's spent half her life waiting on this husband of hers. Being prompt has never been his forte. The only reason she trusts him enough to catch her when she leaps off buildings is because River knows the TARDIS didn’t want to see her reduced to a puddle on concrete any more than the Doctor did.

Alone in the TARDIS and left to her own devices, River turns, taking in the room. It’s exactly as it was the last time she entered, still a museum of mankind, out of time objects scattered along shelves like prizes in a scavenger hunt. Dust catches in sunbeams, and as River steps further into the time distorted room, she finds herself hit with a sudden, inexplicable wave of nausea. Unease swells like a
cancer in the pit of her stomach, one hand falling reflexively to her abdomen while the other searches her bag for her scanner.

If the Old Girl is leaking energy, River needs to know why. The device is heavy in her palm and when it beams to life, what she discovers does little to quell the churning in her veins. The screen before her lights up like a Christmas tree, energy signatures zigzagging this way and that across the shop floor. River taps away at the screen, trying to decider their origin. It doesn’t make sense. The ship is in standby mode; there’s no reason-

*The clock is ticking* flashes behind her eyes, blood on black asphalt and River's throat tightens as she wonders just how literal that statement should be taken.

A thump from the next room makes her beating hearts still. She silences her device, waiting. River’s starting to think she imagined it, that maybe it’s just him indoors when she hears the sound of a box being dragged across wood floors. Curiosity demands she investigate, tucking her tech away as she creeps toward the sound. River follows it through one room and into another, past shelves and coat racks, and she’s almost found her way to the end of the hallway, to a closet she hasn’t seen in six months when she spots Maddie kneeling on the floor, surrounded by miscellaneous knickknacks.

River pauses, leaning against a row of mismatched wellies. Calculating eyes observe the girl for a moment, studying her, trying to pinpoint exactly what it is about her that fills River with such unease. Unaware of River’s prying eyes, the girl continues to sift through the junk, shelving this and tossing that. Her hair is pulled back and out of the way, her clothes sensible and not at all out of place, easily purchased from any shop on the high street. If River’s quite honest, she seems a perfectly normal girl, young and gorgeous and exactly the type that roamed these halls before River came around. But there’s something about her, something River can’t quite place that makes her insides lurch.

Satisfied with her reconnaissance, River clears her throat, alerting the girl of her presence. Maddie lets out a gasp, and River would be a liar to say the shocked expression on the other girl’s face didn’t give her a cruel sense of satisfaction.

Eyes wide, the girl jumps, spinning to see who's behind her. The young girl’s eyes wash over River, dread flashing in her irises for the briefest of moments before they tame themselves into a friendly hello. "You spooked me," Maddie explains, a strangled laugh on the girl's lips as she places a hand over her pounding heart. "I wasn’t aware anyone was in the shop. Did you need help finding anything?"

"No," River says, sharp and cold, one brow arched accusingly. "Do you?"
The girl's expression changes, the salesman smile slipping, eyes narrowing as she sits back on her heels. Recognition dawns, but River can't help but feel like it's all for show as Maddie says, "You're the woman from the pub. River, was it?"

River blinks back at her, harboring no kindness in her smile. "And his date for this afternoon. I hope you don't mind me stealing him."

"Not at all," Maddie swallows, forcing another faux smile. "Where is John?"

"Upstairs," River answers, curt and dismissive as skeptical eyes travel to the boxes littered across the floor. "What are you doing?"

"Just clearing out some old stuff," Maddie shrugs. "Needs a bit of sprucing up, don’t you think?"

"Not particularly," River counters, voice void of emotion. It's her eyes that give her away, sparkling like the untempered schism as she adds, “Then again, I enjoy a bit of chaos."

"To each their own, I suppose." A cordial, half-hearted laugh trickles out from the girl’s lips. A dismissive silence follows, and it's clear by the way Maddie watches her with icy eyes that she expects River to leave.

On principle, River holds her ground. Call her a psychopath or a predator, but the girl’s discomfort only encourages River to take another step into the room. She watches the girl as she goes about her task, noticing how she favors one arm. It’s not her dominant one, not the hand she used at the pub, the one she used to wave goodbye or celebrate with a high five, which can only mean-

"How'd you hurt yourself?" River inquires, and Maddie’s demeanor only seems to stiffen even as her voice remains intentionally light.

"Stumbled while on a hike." Her answer is blunt, and under normal circumstances, relatively believable. But River smells the lie on her, feels how it coagulates in the air, and as she studies the frayed fabric Maddie tries to hide, she can't help but notice how the ruined cloth looks more like a burn than a scratch or a tear.

“Garth Hill?” River inquires further, fishing for inaccuracies.
Rather than dodge the answer, Maddie huffs out, "Brecon Beacons, actually. Best hiking in the U.K."

Her eyes make contact with River's, recognizing the challenge before turning her back and devoting herself to her task once again. A frown pinches at River's lips. Maddie's correct, which means she's telling the truth or, possibly, just done her research. "You travel, then?"

"A bit," she says, keeping her back to River, face hidden; and River is sure her green eyes must be boring a hole through the girl's jumper. If she's a traveler, that would explain the accent. With the shock of their first meeting, River hadn't even noticed before, but the girl certainly isn't Welsh, not that such an occupancy was entirely uncommon. But even so, there's something peculiar about it, something off. A hint of the south east, but not as harsh. Posh, but not quite. London, but slightly off.

"That explains the accent then," River states, curious and intentionally light as she leans against the doorway. "I can't seem to place it. Where's it from?"

Maddie gives an evasive sigh, occupied with her task. "Same place as me."

"And where's that?" River pries, a bit biting and not at all appeased. The girl's shoulders stiffen ever so slightly, River's stubborn patience thickening the air as she waits for an answer. She's about to push Maddie on the subject again when she hears the distinct thudding of her husband's feet down the stairwell.

"Sounds like he's ready for you," Maddie turns, tight lips stretched into a semblance of a smile. Her eyes are heavy with secrets, a rigidness in her frame that reeks of a hidden agenda and malcontent.

River says nothing, her cold stare is voice enough, her deadly silence nothing if not a warning.

The shuffle of feet come skidding around the corner, and River feels the Doctor pause behind her, glancing around before declaring, "Ah, River, there you are." One of his trademark, overly enthusiastic claps fills the air. It isn't until he's by her side that he finally notices his assistant, a surprised smile curling his cheeks as he adds, "Maddie, you're here early."

"Just getting a jump start on inventory," the girl explains, smiling through tight lips.
River takes a deep breath, her piercing gaze raking over the girl one last time before she turns to face the Doctor. His eyes are as bright as his smile and River’s gaze washes over him, throaty voice dropping an octave or two as she takes in the sight of him. "You clean up nice."

He flushes, the rest of the world forgotten as he twirls like a peacock. He did so love it when she made a fuss over him. “Not bad for a shop keep, eh?”

River hums in agreement, continuing to give that lean frame of his the appreciation it deserves. It's hard not to when he's in this suit in particular. It's no top hat and tails, but they may as well be. She knows what that coat means.

He's trying to impress her. He doesn't think she notices, but she does. He's far too young to realize that this is always the coat he dons when he's trying to make an impression. As if his flamboyant displays and blatant showing off aren't enough. Though he may be aware that this is the bowtie he always wears when he has his hearts set on grand adventure, he's yet to associate it with her. He doesn't yet know that their time together is the best adventure there is, that nights with her will become the soundtrack this new baby face will play on repeat.

It isn't all bad, running into him when he's this young. Sometimes it's nice getting to see the rough draft after you've already fallen in love with the finished copy. It doesn't always cut to run her fingers over his rough edges. On days like this, there's something beautiful in seeing just how far he's come. There's traces of the man she married in him even now, the man he'll become already peeking through the seams. He doesn't know it yet, but he's never looked more like hers than when he straightens his bow tie, a grin curling his cheeks as he holds his hand out to her and says-

"Shall we?"

Those slender fingers of his waggle enticingly, and River inhales a deep breath, filling her lungs with the energy he radiates and pasting a warm smile on her face as she purrs, "I thought you'd never ask."

There's a twinkle in his eyes and they're locked on her even as he calls out to his assistant, "Lock up shop tonight, would you, Maddie?"

"'Course," the girl agrees, getting to her feet. River can’t see her, too focused on the Doctor and unwilling to look away, but her answer sounds half pained, half relieved.
Whatever it is River hears in her voice, it demands she turn, stealing one last a look over her shoulder as she takes the Doctor's arm. All that's left to catch is the swish of the girl's hair as she disappears behind down the hall and out of sight. An uneasy feeling still swimming in her veins, River tightens her grip on the Doctor's arm, turns her back on the girl, and lets herself be guided out of the TARDIS.
Secrets in the telling

Chapter Summary

"What do you think?" A chipper voice calls, and River blinks herself out of a daze, turning away from the sheets she has no intention of buying. Green eyes spot the Doctor standing a few meters away, rocking back and forth on his heels by what must be the most atrocious wallpaper River has ever seen.

"I think you might be color blind."

“The seeker embarks on a journey to find what he wants, and discovers, along the way, what he needs.” - Wally Lamb

“Exposure to the temporal schism induces an influx of testosterone, often leading to male offspring.” The monotone voice of her professor drones on, no more or less enthralling than the synthetic air unit humming at the back of the room. A steady tapping of diligent fingers also joins the dull chorus, the sound of River's classmates taking notes on their state-of-the-art ibooks just static that lures her further into daydreams.

Though she may be trapped behind a desk, River is somewhere far away, doodling small circular designs in the corner of her notebook. There are words in her head she can't explain, a language in her mind no one else seems to speak. Her pencil scratches at the paper that's too archaic for its time, and it's only fitting that the swirling syllables come in a form none of her classmates will understand.

Her thoughts are elsewhere today, far away from the biology of extinct species. Her attention keeps straying out the window, to the synthetic sky and the imported grass and the birds that are picking up scraps students have left behind. One robin hops among the gulls. It's brighter and more beautiful than all rest and the sight of it brings a pain to her chest she can't quite explain. It's proud and elegant, and it is alone. It's still a bird, yes, but its feathers are too bright to blend with its dull surroundings. Its songs are more beautiful, and sung in a tune the others will never quite understand. It doesn't quite fit, but it stays, surrounded by a sea of strangers. River knows what that's like, to envy ordinary people, with all their normalcy and bland colors and easily-forgotten faces.

Distantly, she hears her professor continue, “Without any subjects around today to test, it's hard to
be sure. But research indicates that seventy seven percent of regenerations would result in male physiology.”

Vaguely aware of the discussion happening around her, River snorts. Leave it to the Time Lords to explain away sexism with science. It isn't the first time she's scoffed during today's lecture and the professor's eyes settle on River like a bull seeing red. In another life, it's a look she received many times before, and she can't help the sting in her chest that follows the realization that Amy wouldn't be waiting for her this time. No red hair haunting the hallway outside the headmasters door. No gangly young Rory there to collect her books and meet her at the bus stop.

It's a relief when another student pipes up, distracting the professor before River can be scolded for mocking yet another lesson plan. His name is Joe or John or Dave or Bill. One of those remarkably dull, classic Earth names that just won't seem to go out of fashion. Sometimes she wonders why she chose this place when she could have studied anywhere in the universe. She wonders what it is that makes her crave the company of humans, of normalcy, of things she almost is but not quite.

“But the body's natural reaction to danger is the production of cortisol,” River’s peer states. “Surely that would counteract any excess testosterone.”

“For other species, yes,” their Professor answers. “They are antagonists. But due to the Gallifreyan’s unique biology and perspective on death, no fight or flight reflex is triggered, and the testosterone induced by the schism is left unchecked. Think of it in terms of how temperature controls gender in Earth reptiles.”

“Women were rare, then?” Another voice questions.

“Yes, quite. Female regenerations were so rare, in fact, most Gallifreyan children were not born at all, but rather...”

It isn't a scoff she bites back this time, but rather internalized disdain. Women were rare and yet she managed it three times. It should probably make her feel special, but all it does is make her feel defective. Human plus, Time Lord but not quite, trapped somewhere in the middle like a damned soul in purgatory.

The Doctor certainly didn't see it that way, not if the doe eyes he always flashes her are any indication. Whenever she does something clever or daring or impossible, something that's more than just human, he looks at her like she's a miracle. In the quiet moments, when he speaks about the Time Lords, he refers to them as their people, not just his people, and for a second, she feels like more than just a half breed cooked in a lab.
But then he goes, taking that smile with him, and that spark in her veins makes her feel anything but special. River's eyes drift back outside, back to the robin among the gulls, and she can't help but notice that unique is just another word for alone.

He sticks out like a sore thumb wherever he goes. She's always found it rather charming in the past, his tweed alongside a suit of armour or swanky royal gowns. He's always been dazzling, a twitchy ball of enthusiasm wrapped up in swirling coattails. In the here and now, he's out of place among the sea of jeans and hoodies, too dressed up for the shops they visit, hair too messy and his smile too bright. Everyone around them seems to have their face buried in a mobile phone, and yet his eyes keep straying to her. He smiles and it's like the sun. He laughs and flowers bloom just to hear it.

And it breaks her hearts.

It makes her insides awash with a bone-deep chill, because he thinks that he's one of them. He doesn't know that he's extraordinary, and that might be the hardest part to swallow. He's neither hers nor is he human, and it's a thought she hasn't been able to shake since the moment they stepped into public with her hand tucked into his arm.

She's been distant today, not that the Doctor seems to have noticed. He's bounced back and forth from one color pallet to the next without ever taking a breath. Not at all unlike how he was the last time, though she tries not to think about that. Every time she does, her chest feels as if it's going to collapse in on itself. Instead, her thoughts stray to corpses in alleys and the girl they left alone in the shop. She thinks of warnings and watches and if she brushes up against him once or twice, she tells herself its only because she's trying to feel if he keeps that invaluable trinket on his person.

They flitter from store to store, laughing, joking, teasing. He asks her questions and it feels like the old days, when it seemed like there was a mousetrap on her tongue. She says too little for fear of saying too much, the hand he hovers over her lower back just an echo of normalcy, almost as they should be but just shy of the mark. And yet, she doesn't want this day to end.

Which is exactly how they found themselves in a catch-all department store. It houses everything from toys to sheets to model rooms on display. That husband of hers never could resist a toy store, and when his face lit up as they passed, well, she couldn't help suggesting they enter. They don't actually sell paint, but at least she can get an idea of what she does, in fact, want. River isn't sure such a thing exists, and if it does, it has nothing to do with the shade of the walls and entirely on who helps her paint them.
"What do you think?" A chipper voice calls, and River blinks herself out of a daze, turning away from the sheets she has no intention of buying. Green eyes spot the Doctor standing a few meters away, rocking back and forth on his heels by what must be the most atrocious wallpaper River has ever seen.

"I think you might be color blind."

His eyes widen in offense, quickly followed by a stubborn huff as he tugs on the lapels of his coat. "Nothing wrong with my eyes. Green's a great color."

"Yes, green is." River agrees, coming to stand by his side as she adds, "This, on the other hand, looks like sick."

"You know, you could just say you're not interested like a normal person."

"If you wanted to spend time with a normal person," River brushes past him, tossing him a smirk over her shoulder as she passes, "you wouldn't have called me."

His contemplative nod is all the confession she requires, but he mumbles his agreeance anyway. "You got me there," tumbling off his lips even as his eyes spark with newfound interest.

He bounds across the aisle, headed for a model train display. River can't help but watch him, a fond smile tugging her cheeks as he skips across tile floor. He's been an absolute dream today, escorting her through half a dozen stores while she crinkled her nose at every single one of his suggestions. He's all smiles, despite his exasperation, and it's astounding, how someone so childlike can have such patience, like those old bones of his haven't forgotten what it feels like to cradle a raging universe in the palm of his hand.

"Do you have a theme yet?" her almost husband asks, pushing a model train along it's track. "Jungle, trains, ponies? Oh, oh, monsters!" He catches sight of a fuzzy looking creature with three eyes, lunging for it, and thrusting it in her direction. "You could have a little alien catcher in training."

The overexcited remark earns them a curious glance from a nearby couple, but it's hard to care about prying eyes when his are so wide and exuberant. A smile tugging at her lips, River plucks the stuffed animal from his grasp and sets it back on the shelf. "I think I'll hold off on parental pressuring until the poor dear is out of nappies."
His attention span expires the moment his hands are free, continuing to skip down the aisle in search of anything and nothing in particular as he asks, "How did you wind up in such a profession, anyhow?"

"Family business," River hums, lingering near a violet sheet set that reminds her of The Cartwheel galaxy. "And I was thinking space."

His nose crinkles, those invisible brows furrowing. "Black's a bit unorthodox for a baby's room."

River's hand ghosts over soft cotton, fingers caressing fabric the way they once stirred the dust around gas giants. There's more to space than just emptiness. The Doctor knew that better than most. There are ice rings that sparkle like diamonds and supernovas that bloom like roses. There are asteroid belts the color of sapphire and gaseous vents that bubble out clouds of sparkling emerald. The universe is so much more complex than simply black.

But he knows nothing of that life, not right now, and River finds herself stopping just short of close enough, a force field between them when once nothing, come hell or high water, could have kept them apart. And maybe it's the distance talking, that old familiar melancholy, that makes her murmur, "The darker the sky, the clearer the constellations."

It's the only defense she can muster, spoken more to herself than to anyone in particular. It's only when her gaze strays from the shelf that she finds the Doctor's eyes are on her. There's a secret behind those swirling pools of hazel, like he's seeing into her a bit too clearly, curious about all the wrong things. He chooses only to hum, accepting her answer. "Why did you wait so long to do all this? Not that I'm judging."

River deliberately turns away, stubborn eyes fixed on purple linens as she swallows hard around the words, "The father and I were going to do it together."

Her words hang in the air like dust, a glimmer of truth that quickly fades back into shadow. River feels it the moment he steps forward, taking it upon himself to close the distance between them. His nearness burns, her skin sizzling like kindle left too close to an open flame. But the heat of his presence is nothing compared to the scorching curiosity in his tone as he presses a soft but inquisitive, “And?”

"And things happened,” River exhales, sharp and quick, the air in her lungs as good a fortress as any. “Stuff got in the way, and it never felt right doing it without him.”
"You were waiting for him," he states the revelation plainly, working his jaw, contemplating her thinly-veiled excuse. She hasn’t turned to face him, but she knows what she’ll find written on his face. She can practically hear his teeth grinding, feel his mind rattling as it comes to terms with the obvious truth. “You think he’s coming back.”

Hearing it spoken steals her breath more than she’d like to admit. It isn’t a question, and her throat has gone dry, but she manages to meet his eyes, her voice soft but strong as she answers, “I do.”

The light in his expression dies like a star depleted of hydrogen, the warmth in his eyes a few degrees colder, something dark and affronted in his tone as he asks, “Why?”

River shuts her eyes as everything inside her constricts. She’s lost for words, breathless as he spreads her thighs like she’s his for the devouring. River arches toward that smirking mouth, toward the tongue that has brought empires to its knees. His lips map her inner thighs, kisses like brands as he makes his way up up up to where she wants him most. River moans her encouragements, bucking towards his face and he rumbles out a sound that can only be described as thunder, as rolling electricity and lightning on her skin. His eyes are dark and swirling with hurricanes as he hovers over her core. He's watching her when he finally relents, when he gives her what she wants, when he drags his tongue across her folds. Her body shivers at the delicious friction, surrendering to the feel of him, but she keeps her eyes open, keeps them locked with his; and that's why she doesn't miss when everything changes.

The lust is his pupils dims, a darkness replaced with a blinding brightness. She's about to question the change, a fleeting concern on her tongue, when he probes deeper, not to tease, but to explore, to taste. The action rips a moan from her lips and she fights the urge to wrap her legs around his shoulders to keep him there. She wishes she had, because in the next moment, the Doctor is pulling away from her, scattering kisses across her naval and up between her breasts. Her body writhes beneath him, groaning her protests at the loss of him. He drops a kiss to her nose and when their eyes meet again, she finds him beaming down at her. She doesn't understand why he's smiling as if all his Christmases have come at once. It's hard to focus on anything except the ache between her legs and the places his skin touches hers.

"Doctor-" she complains, her nails digging into his back, dragging his hips closer to hers.

He cuts her off with a kiss. It isn't a clash of teeth and tongues. It isn't desperate or burning. It doesn't make her hips buck or her insides burn. But rather, it makes her hearts swell. The kiss is tender and reverent, his mouth delicate and chaste. The giggle on his lips is nothing like the wicked smirk he wore as he dipped between her thighs. He's a different man entirely as he presses his forehead to hers and breathes, "River Song, you are a miracle."
"I just know," River confesses, because she can't say because you promised you would, because you wouldn't miss this for the world, not if you could help it, because you're already here.

He isn't looking at her like she's a miracle now. He's more perplexed than anything, the lines around his pursed lips speaking of puzzles, just a dash of pity, and is that disappointment she sees lurking in those hazel eyes? "Well, forgive me if I don't want to meet him when he does."

He turns away from her, leaving his curt words to hang in empty air. River finds herself frozen in place, taken aback. "What does that mean?" she snaps, fighting the way her spine stiffens, shoulders made ridged in defense and defiance.

"I don't like him," the man before her offers easily, feigning interest in a fuzzy blanket.

River scoffs, an incredulous, hollow laugh tumbling out in the form of, "You don't know him."

She feels ridiculous even as the argument falls from her lips, but something inside her compels her to defend him, to justify the choice they made. Heedless of their past and their reasons, the man who ought to be the Doctor keeps his vision firmly on the top shelf, out of her eye line as he quips, "I know he left you to deal with this pregnancy on your own. I don't need to know anything else."

A wave of what might be rage swells in River's chest, the sudden spike in her pulse making the baby kick. She finds herself chasing after the lanky imposter, irrationally cross as she insists. "He has his reasons."

"None good enough," the man beside her snorts, and something inside River burns red as the cloak of a cultist, choking on ash from volcanic fumes.

"It's not like he chose it," River bites out, stepping in front of him, stopping him in his path, and demanding to be seen. "He had to.. we had to.." explanations and excuses catch in her throat and River deflates, sighing, "It’s complicated. You wouldn’t understand."

He doesn't believe a word of her protests. The speech is far too practiced, even to her own ears. It reeks of mantra that she repeats to herself in the mirror every morning. River isn’t sure she why she feels compelled to convince him otherwise. Surely it will only push him away. But she can’t stop herself. She can’t bear the thought of any version of him believing he’d abandon her. Even the thought tastes of bad memories, of before, when she was never quite sure what or who they were to one another. Those days are gone now, and she refuses to admit any other alternative, especially
when she's looking him in the eyes.

"You're right," he concedes, shrugging. "Not my place."

"Thank you." Forgiveness falls from her lips as it always does, another stone in their sanctuary of always and completely. It’s only when his expression flickers that she realizes he hadn't offered any apologizes at all.

He steps past her once again, those broad shoulders deliberately not brushing her as he passes. River blinks at the aisle ahead, steeling herself before following after. He’s a few feet away, feigning interest in rubber ducks. She doesn’t close the distance between them, and this time, neither does he.

It's quiet as they stand on either side of the aisle, both pretending to be captivated by trinkets. She wants to break the silence, shatter it like glass, but the only words her mouth longs to form are more empty explanations. She wants to tell him how she didn't want to go, that she didn't ask to be left alone. She wants to tell him how she misses him and doesn’t all in the same moment. She wants to say how much she’s hated it, being alone these long months, how she resents him sometimes, because he always gets to be the one who forgets.

But she bites her tongue instead, the iron in her mouth just a promise of the future. She can’t possibly tell him of the toll this has taken on her, not when he’ll remember this conversation one day, not when the memory of it will cause his future self pain.

"What about Basil?" he breaks the silence for her, and River turns to him with furrowed brows.

"Sorry?"

"For the baby, what do you think of the name Basil?"

The casual question shatters the ice that had frosted between them. River lets out a laugh, warm as summer. "You can't be serious."

"Why not?" he protests, faux offense contorting that baby face. "That's a great name."
River shakes her head, drawn toward a rack of onesies. "I was thinking something more simple, like… Andy." It reminds me of Rory, and doesn't mean to say it aloud, but she must because-

"What's a Rory?" The Doctor's question grates in her ears like a knife scraping across a dinner plate.

She looks away, focusing on tiny jumpers she neither needs or cares about as she answers, "It was my father's name"

"What was it short for?"

"Nothing. It was just Rory. Simple. Strong." Her gaze lingers on a frilly pink nightgown and all River can think of is the Halloween she and Amy made Rory dress up as the big bad wolf in grandmother's clothes. "What do you think of it?"

She turns back toward the Doctor in time to watch him testing out the name, over dramatic mouth rolling the syllables before he crinkles his nose and says, "Nope. Don't like it."

River frowns. "Why not?"

"I figured it'd be more like yours. Something mysterious and eccentric. Oh! What about Disco?"

At the suggestion, River gives a derisive, incredulous snort. “That’s not a name. That’s a hideous genre.”

The Doctor huffs, rich with irritation he doesn’t mean. "Why do you want my opinion, anyway?"

"Because you're-" She swallows back the word father, a lump in her throat as she offers instead a fraction of the truth. "-important to me."

There's that secret smile of his again, curling his cheeks like he still has all of time and space up his sleeve. And just like that, River finds herself homesick for someone right in front of her. Nostalgia burns in her chest, a sensation that doubles tenfold when she sees his eyes go wide at the sight of miniature bow ties.
"Now, these you have to get." He says, brandishing the clothing in her direction. River already has a pack of six waiting in a box at her flat, but she's hardly going to admit that to him.

"No one in their right mind would wear those."

"I wear them." He smirks, shoulders wiggling with unearned confidence as he straightens his own neckwear.

"Like I said," River smirks. "No one in their right mind."

He looks affronted for only a moment before yet another pint-sized distraction steals his focus. He abandons the bow ties in favor of a Stetson. "River!" he declares loud enough for people on the second floor to hear. "You can't say no to this. Miniature Cowboys are definitely cool."

"Oh, no," River chuckles, taking the tiny offense out of his hands, stroking it reverently even as she protests, "He doesn't do hats."

"He?" A small, surprised smile curls the corner of his cheeks, trinkets forgotten as his gaze locks onto her.

To her credit, she barely gives pause, nodding as she offers him a shy, faux smile as she puts the object back. Her coy manner only seems to draw him closer, inching ever nearer. River can't help but wonder if he does it consciously or if the pull between them is something that comes as naturally as breathing.

"You know," he observes in that low, curious way he does that always makes her shiver. "You may be the first mum in human history who didn't automatically show me the sonogram picture."

"That'd be because I don't have one." River forces out a breathless laugh, stepping back, but not to be away from him, which is just as well because he follows after, caught up in her gravity.

His brow furrows, perplexed and just a hint of challenge. "Then what makes you so certain it's a boy?"
Her nose is pressed in a book, one of her favorites. She's read the same paragraph at least four time already, and not because she loves the way the words flow, but rather because she's finding it increasingly difficult to concentrate. The Doctor sits beside her on the settee, doing a poor impression of reading a book. He hasn't turned the page in half an hour, far too busy stealing glances at her from the corner of his eye.

River lets out a heavy sigh, shifting in her seat, and the Doctor jumps, eyes snapping forward. Thus far, she's pretended not to notice, but as she attempts to make it through this paragraph for the fifth time only to feel his eyes drift toward her once again, she's had quite enough.

"Do you need something, dear?"

"No," he answers just a bit too quickly. Then adds, "Why? Do you?"

River huffs, tucking away her book and making to stand. The Doctor leaps up before River's feet hit the floor.

“I’ll get it! What do you need?”

She eyes him skeptically. He's been fussing over her for days and for the life of her she can't figure out why. She's starting to think he's guilty of something, though she can't imagine what. Since she got her memories back, they haven't seen much of anything apart from the bedroom.

"I was going to get some biscuits," she says warily, and he brightens.

"No need to get up! Got them right here." He digs into his pocket and, low and behold, out come her favorite box of chocolate treats.

"Thank you..." Her voice is more accusation than thanks, River's suspicious eyes narrowing as she reaches for them. She settles back into her seat, but her sharp gaze hasn't left her husband. The Doctor rocks back and forth on his heels like he's waiting for something, or possibly distracting her from something. River shifts her gaze over each shoulder just to be sure, scanning the aisles of books and finding nothing.
“What are you reading?” his too-bright voice asks, and River looks back to him, finding him still hovering in front of her.

River glances down at the book in her lap, the one she's been trying to focus on for the better part of an hour, and says, "The Myths and Legends of the Vondrax: An In-depth Archaeological Study on the Ancient Species."

"Fascinating," her husband beams, practically hopping into the seat next to her. "Tell me about it."

"Okay," River snaps, shutting her reading material with a dull thump before discarding her book and biscuits. Waiting on her was one thing, but feigning interest in archaeology was another beast entirely. "What did you do?"

"Nothing!" He squeaks out just a bit too defensively. River levels him with a glare until he fidgets, blushing. "More something we did."

Her suspicions gaining even more traction, River demands, "Out with it."

Her husband takes a deep, steeling breath, inhaling strength. River's pulse quickens in anticipation, mind racing with possible dangers and oncoming disasters and impending doom until Doctor blurts out the words, "You're pregnant."

River stares blankly back at her nervous husband, the only words she can think to form- "That's impossible."

The Doctor blanches, not exactly the reaction he was hoping for. "Apparently not."

"Sweetie," River stutters over her own incredulous laugh. "What are you talking about? How would you even know?"

"I..." He flushes slightly as he explains, "tasted it."

"You what?" River gapes, an incredulous brow climbing her forehead as crimson steals across the Doctor's cheeks.
"The other night when we..." his guilt ridden voice trails off. River follows the thought until-

"Oh," is all she can think to say, because suddenly, it all makes sense. Why his mood changed, why he's been giving her even larger doe eyes than usual. He’s been absolutely giddy. She’s not sure she’s ever seen him this excited. Even now, he shifts in his seat, a secret thrill squirming just beneath his skin. He’s trying to hide it, to keep it at bay, but his micro expressions give him away, body humming like it's ready for adventure. His hazel eyes watch her cautiously, like she's a geyser that could erupt at any moment.

She’d be a liar to say he wasn’t justified in his wariness, that terror wasn’t creeping up her spine. But there’s a smile playing at her husband’s lips, the kind she's never been able to ignore, the kind that's always effortlessly tamed all her worst fears. It's only when that beautiful mouth of his doesn’t speak that River realizes he's waiting for her. For once in his life, he's holding his tongue, doing his best to bite back his excitement as he waits for her reaction, her approval. He's waiting to hear that she wants this as much as he does.

“This wasn’t exactly what I meant when I suggested we invite someone back to the ship with us,” she teases.

He shifts uncomfortably in his seat. The light behind his smile has dimming, his thinly-veiled excitement dying before her eyes. "Well, yes” he says, wringing nervous hands. “It is rather unexpected.”

River covers his hands with her own, scooting closer to him on the small settee. She dips her head, cupping his cheek with her free hand and turning his chin until their eyes meet once again. “I’ve always been fond of... surprises.”

The softly spoken insinuation makes the Doctor noticeably brighten, all his worries evaporating in a moment. Her own fears aside, there’s no denying the Doctor’s beaming grin. There’s a reason he always gravitates towards humans, toward the young at heart. Once the seed is planted, one never really out grows the need. It’s always been buried inside him, fatherhood just a dormant flower waiting for spring.

River lets out a sigh, warm and sweet and playful as she smiles and says, “I’ll never be done sharing you with pretty girls, will I?”

The Doctor smirks, a twinkle in his eyes as he nuzzles his nose into her cheek and presses his palm
“Intuition, I suppose.” River shrugs, eyes still glued to his. The man before her tilts his chin, eyes curious.

"Why are you smirking?" he asks and River does her best to tame her expression.

"No reason," she coos, turning away to hide her face and the honesty she can't quite bury. She comes face-to-face with another display, a bright pink cot pressed against a mustard yellow wall.

“What an eyesore,” the Doctor observes, his breath stirring her curls as he glances over her shoulder.

River chuckles, “For once we agree.”

“No to be cliché,” he starts, and she can tell by the sound of his voice that his attention span has succumbed to yet another distraction. “But what about this one?”

River turns, eyes intent on seeking out the Doctor. Instead, they land on the bluest blue she's ever seen. It looks as inviting as the outer most rings of the Andromeda galaxy, like nostalgia and the worn leather cover of her diary. It's hopeful and bright like the blue of her mother and father's front door. It reminds her of the most beautiful ship in the universe.

"I like it," she breathes. There’s a smile tugging at her cheeks as she takes a step toward the display, fingers stroking along the vibrantly colored wall. Call her sentimental, but she can't think of anything else she'd want their son to be surrounded by. "This one will do just fine."

X

It's easier than she thought it would be, sweet talking the salesman. He was all too eager to phone the manufacturer and cheekily order a few extra cans under the guise of needing them to touch up the store's display wall. She didn't even get to use her lipstick. But it's hard to complain when the perfect
color will be ready and waiting for her in a matter of weeks. Judging by the look on the Doctor's face, she doubts she'll have to do the painting alone. Then again, maybe he's just pleased the day wasn't a complete waste.

It was his idea to celebrate, popping in for ice cream at the closest shop he could find. The sun beats down on them as they wait for the bus, chocolate dripping from his fingers, melting faster than he can lap it up. She'd laugh if she weren't having similar troubles with her own peach flavored dessert. His toothy grin is worth it, though, and he flashes it every time she passes him a napkin without his having to ask for it.

He passes the time with more curious questions of what she does and how, asking for details on her most mundane adventures and grinning when she tells him of the ones she never saw coming. "Long story short, the President turned out to be just angry gelatinous goo in a human suit."

"Blimey, so that's why the skin coloring was always off."

"Quite. It overcompensated with the pigmentation and went a bit orange. But that's nothing. You should hear about the time I-" River glances in his direction, finding the corners of his mouth curling, her smile bright and perplexed as she asks, "What?"

"It's just," he begins, biting back a grin, doing his best to tame amusement, "you have ice cream on your cheek."

A laugh that's half embarrassed, half genuine bubbles from her throat as River dabs at her face. "Did I get it?"

He shakes his head, still biting back a smile, his eyes on her mouth as he reaches his hand up, thumb wiping along the corner of her mouth. River’s lips part instinctively, surrendering to him as they always have, the slightest touch making her whole body sing. He's standing so close, too close. It makes her hearts skip because people don't touch her, not really. Her fellow students give her a wide birth when she walks through the hall, like they can sense she's not quite one of them. Even her professors are careful not to get too close, fingers never brushing as they pass back her papers. They don't get in her personal space, frightened by the wicked gleam in her eye and her predatory smile. But he does. He leans in close and dares to touch her like he isn't afraid at all, which is odd. He knows better than most how dangerous she can be. She learns to tolerate it. She gets accustomed. She craves it. She misses it when he's gone.

His hand falls from her cheek, taking the moment with it as he retreats safely back to his side. She wonders if his fingers burn like her cheek does, if her blush is as red as the hearts thundering in her
chest. River has to resist the urge to follow after, to lean into him and wrap her arms around his neck. She clears her throat instead, and it's only when she forces herself to look away from his chocolate-stained mouth that she notices her usual bus rounding the corner.

"Our ride's here." River nods toward the vehicle in question, and when the man beside her begins digging in his pocket for coins, she adds, "That won't be necessary."

Brow furrowed, he looks back to her. "Why not?"

"You'll see," is all the explanation she gives as the bus pulls to a stop in front of her.

When the doors open, Glyn is waiting for her with his usual delighted smile. "Mrs. Song," he beams. "Fancy seeing you in the daylight hours."

A chuckle that's just a bit too throaty to be decent spills from her smirking mouth. "No rest for the wicked, I'm afraid," she says, climbing the steps.

Her chocolate-coated date follows dutifully behind her, and when Glyn's warm gaze lands on him, he thrusts out a weathered hand. "You must be the husband I've heard absolutely nothing about."

There's a teasing smile curling his lips but River can't help the way she pales. Corrections and protests die on her tongue. The lanky man beside her is already extending a sticky, chocolate-coated hand before he comes to his senses, eyes widening.

"I'm not-" he sputters, cheeks flushing. "It’s… she’s just… we didn’t-"

Frantic eyes glance toward River helplessly, rocking back on his heels. River takes pity on him, remembering herself. "This is John. He's my victim for the day."

“Oh,” Glyn retracts his hand, glancing between them with perplexed interest. “I do hope you’re behaving.”

“Never,” River winks, curling her hand around the Doctor's arm and pulling him down the aisle.
“I’m your victim, am I?” he whispers into her hair, standing a bit too close to be decent as they seek out two seats.

River slides in first, her back to the window and eyes pinned on him. “Is that a problem?”

“I was rather hoping I was your date,” he offers, taking a long lick of his ice cream as he slides in next to her.

“Maybe you’re both,” she counters, keen eyes still locked on him as she samples her own frozen treat.

The Doctor swallows, voice lower than it was a moment before when he says, “ Seems a bit like mixed signals to me.”

River blinks at him innocently. “Not if you’re a praying mantis.”

“Or a black widow,” he adds, and River’s smirk only grows.

“Exactly.”

He dips his chin, hiding his face behind his ice cream, and there it is again, that urge to fold into him, to lick the chocolate from the corner of his lips, to lean into him and take what she wants the way linear days taught her to.

She used to be afraid to want. In her youth, it wasn't something to which she was accustomed. As she grew older, as she clawed her way into this new skin, the Doctor taught her that it was okay to want. She learned to barter and steal, and on very special days, when she let her walls down, she even dared to ask.

It spoiled her, because looking at him now, she wants nothing more than to touch him, to kiss him. But she can't. She wants him, the man who showed her that want was okay. But there's no point in asking now. She wants too much.
“I’d believe it, you know,” he murmurs, and River turns to him curiously, watching as he licks melted cream from the tips of his fingers.

It’s more distracting than she’d like to admit, and she swallows back all the wickedly delicious thoughts those digits of his inspire. “Believe what?”

Her almost husband leans in close again, a secret on his tongue and a smile on his lips. “We didn’t pay.”

His whisper isn’t nearly as subtle as he thinks it is, but the way his breath ghosts across her skin is worth the scowls it earns from the other passengers. When he pulls back, his eyes are expectant, as if he’s just laid all his answers at the alter of her feet.

“And?” River blinks back at him, brow arching.

The Doctor bites back a smirk, eyes on his ice cream as he muses, “Paint, bus rides. Do people always give you everything you want for free?”

“Not all the time,” she admits, a grin sneaking up her cheeks. “Sometimes I steal it.”

“You can’t have that, River.”

“Funny, I don’t recall asking.”

“It’s not for sale,” he reiterates, a sternness to that baby face she finds rather delicious.

“The best things hardly ever are,” she hums, a wicked gleam in her green eyes.

The Doctor’s firm palm on her lower back guides her away from temptation. For a man who operates almost entirely on whimsy, he has an awful lot of rules. If anything, his continued strictness only makes her want to misbehave more. Honestly, it’s his own fault for bringing her to a museum of twenty-third century toys. He may as well have brought her to a buffet.
Careful to steer her away from the jewelry they say belonged to the first queen of The Euromericas, the Doctor invades her personal space to scold, “You can’t steal something just because you fancy it.”

“You can’t,” River snorts, and the Doctor straightens his lapels.

“I’ll have you know my slight of hand skills are renowned.”

“Sure they are, sweetie.”

He steps in front of her, waggling a finger he probably thinks is authoritative. Bless. “Who do you think taught Houdini his escape acts?”

“You don’t have to convince me you’re good with handcuffs, honey,” River coos. “But cheap parlor tricks are no match for the emancipation of priceless heirlooms.”

“Is that what you’re calling it now?”

“Has a nice ring to it, doesn’t it?” She smirks again, their eyes peering into one another.

“I’m every bit as good as you, you know.”

She flashes him that smile she knows he loves, the one with far too many teeth. “Prove it.”

The Doctor shifts before her, just like she knew he would. When his pupils widen just a fraction, determined eyes breaking from hers to scan the room, River knows she’s won. She studies his sharp features as his gaze flitters from one display to another, choosing his prize carefully. Eventually, his vision stills on something just beyond her shoulder, a grin spreading across his face like wildfire.

“Come along, Song,” he quips, fingers snaking between hers. “I’ve got something just your size.”

There’s a laugh on her lips as he tugs her further into the room. When the crowd parts, River’s eyes land on the most sinful, apple-red Louboutins she’s ever seen.
The man beside her chuckles even as he shakes his head in disapproval. “Not that I’m condoning it, but what all have you stolen?”

“Nothing that wasn’t begging to be liberated,” River offers humbly.

He laughs then, a soft chuckle on that mouth she knows so well. “It must be nice, just taking everything you want.”

“Not everything,” River shrugs, unable to stop the way her vixen smile softens. “Sometimes it’s nice when the things you want chase you.”

His hazel eyes drop to her mouth, his tongue snaking out like he can taste the peach ice cream staining her lips. She wonders if he’s even aware he’s doing it, if he’s conscious of the way his body shifts towards hers with every bump and curve they pass along the road. She wonders what exactly it is he's playing at, if he's truly considered that there's a child growing inside her, one he doesn’t realize is his own.

Does he know he's falling for her? She knows where she stands, where she's always stood, as close to him as he'll let her. But what about him? Has he stopped to consider an end game? To this human version of him, was she just a bit of fun to pass the time? That’s how she used to feel. Just a shiny toy. A puzzle in need of solving. His next distraction.

Human or no, there’s something in his eyes this time. Maybe it’s years or experience or her own blind hope reflected in his irises, but she can't help but feel like maybe he knows full well what he's getting into.

A slight jolt wakes River from her reverie, and the Doctor must have pressed the button for her, because the bus has begun to slow. Recognizing her stop, River makes to stand. The Doctor is faster, leaping to his feet and holding out his hand.

River arches a brow. “Coming with me, are you?”

“What kind of victim would I be if I didn’t at least walk you to your door?” He grins, bright and sweet as chocolate and just as impossible to say no to.
River takes his offered hand without argument, following behind as he leads them off the bus. She spares a wave for Glyn as she passes, and before she knows it, the setting sun has found her face once again.

Blinking against what’s left of the daylight, River turns toward the man beside her. He’s frozen in place on the sidewalk, fond recognition crinkling his eyes as he says, "I know this place."

"No flies on you," River teases, tossing him a wink as she steps past him, fishing for her keys.

“The other morning," he explains, "I couldn't place why I recognized the building, what with being distracted with the aliens and all.” A laughs slips out from between crooked lips as he adds, "Maddie lives here."

River nearly drops her what's left of her ice cream, whirling back around to face him. “Excuse me?”

“Maddie, my assistant, she-"

"Yes, I got that. Are you certain?"

"Quite," he nods, oblivious to or uncaring of River’s cagey accusation. "Walked her home a few times. Cardiff at night and all that."

River bristles with suspicion at this newfound information. Not only was this girl hiding under the Doctor's nose, but apparently she has been right under River’s as well. How could that be? Nothing got in and out of this building without River Song knowing about it. She knew the name and background of every mug in this place. There's no way that girl was living here. It must be a mistake or a trick, and despite the many frustrations nagging at the back of her mind, there's only one concern that claws its way out of her mouth.

“And is she as good a decorator as she is an assistant?” River bites out as coolly as she can while flashing a smile that's more teeth than pleasantry.

He must misread her trepidation for something as primitive as jealousy, because there’s a twitch to his lips as he pops the last bite of his ice cream cone into his mouth. "Wouldn’t know. Never been
It comforts her more than she thought it would, the admission that he hasn’t been in anyone’s flat but her own. In the back of her mind, she distantly considers that she might be a tad more jealous than she’d like to admit. Even so, the grip on her keys eases, less bruising, but her shoulders are still wrought with tension. River turns back to the entrance of her building, nerves prickling, head buzzing so loud she almost misses it when he says-

"Do you like museums? I know a great one if you'd, you know- if you haven't already been."

"Yes."

"Right, of course you've been. Silly suggestion."

"No," River lets a soft laugh bubble out between her lips. "I mean, yes, I like museums. I'd love to go."

"Oh." A smile softens his features, rocking back and forth on his heels. "With me?"

"That was the assumption, yes." River laughs again, and this time, the sound of it makes him brighten like the sunrise.

"We could walk there. You like to walk, don’t you?" Questions spiral off his tongue in a nervous rush, hands rubbing together as he grins around the words, "What else do you like? Decaf coffee? Oh, self-torment! We can go to a bakery and not eat any cakes."

"Or we could find a nice cafe and sit."

"Watch other people do the walking. Love it." The prospect of seeing her again has made him giddy, skin buzzing like he's about to show her some collapsing star, like grand adventure waits for them on the shelves of a carefully-maintained museum. His body sways toward her, trying to capture her in his gravity, to keep her from disappearing beyond the boundary of her building door.

River wants nothing more than to give in, to drown in him, to steal hours with him like she always
use to. She wants to forget about alien hunters on the streets of Cardiff. She wants to forget about his assistant and the fact that she keeps cropping up in incriminating ways. She wants to throw caution to the wind and drag him into her flat by the straps of his braces.

"Not today," she says instead, offering him a mournful smile. “I need to pop into work for a bit.”

His delighted expression slips. "Of course. But later?"

"Later," River agrees, the soft promise for her ears as well as his.

The Doctor looks away from her for the first time, gaze drifting over her shoulder to her block of flats. "I could walk you up, if you like?" His eyes glimmer with an addicting amount of hope and as much as she wants him to…

"This will do," River declines. "Ethan gets his wires in a bundle when I bring home unexpected guests. It makes him nervous, and well, I don't fancy any more broken plates."

“Wouldn't want to upset any robots.” He offers her a crooked grin, his fringe falling over his eyes. "I hear they're prone to uprising."

"You've no idea," River purrs, but his hands are already in his pockets, taking a regretful step backwards.

"Call me," he chirps, nearly tripping over the bottom step.

River bites back a smirk, pretending she hadn't noticed. “I thought you never answered your phone.”

“I could make an exception.”

He grins, and when he nearly stumbles over again, River rolls fond eyes. “Turn around before you give yourself another concussion.”

The command only makes his lips stretch farther, offering her a salute as he obeys. She watches him
go, skipping backward a few more paces before he finally turns and disappears around the corner.

With a somber sigh, River turns back to the door, twisting the handle and stepping inside. The metal obstacle clicks closed behind her, and River’s smitten smile slips from her face like an anvil. It’s exhausting, being around this him that isn’t him, too-toeing around the truth while the gravity of him beckons her to dive in head first. Walking all over town with him makes her hearts ache as much as it does her back. It’s worth it, though, taking a bit of pain with the pleasure, a dose of poison mixed into the antidote.

River takes a deep breath, recharging her bones, because though her date has ended, the day is far from over. She went out with him today for a reason, to lure him from the shop so Jack and his team could keep an eye on his assistant. As it turns out, they’d been looking in all the wrong places. If Maddie’s actually living here, it’s possible she’s been the one dragging energy all over the city. If nothing else, run-off from the TARDIS engines will have left traces on her person, which should provide a nice trail for River to follow. Depositing what’s left of her treat in the bin, River immediately reaches for her scanner.

The moment she turns the device on, it bursts to life in the form of temporal energy signatures, the same curious readings she found in the TARDIS as well as on Jack’s computer back at the Hub. The trail of sparking energy winds down the hall, toward the back of the building. River follows it to a dingy-looking door on the bottom floor. No lights shine from underneath the door and as River presses her ear to it, no noises can be heard from inside. The girl must still be at the shop, and it’s a pity, really, that no one’s home. River was almost looking forward to getting the girl alone, out from under the Doctor’s watchful eye. She might not be able to question her old fella around. But behind closed doors, with a bit of memory wipe serum? There’s not much River couldn’t get from a person under those circumstances.

For now, she’ll have to settle for some recreational breaking and entering. The lock surrenders to her clever fingers easily, and when she turns the handle and presses lightly, the barrier yields with a soft creak. The room beyond is mostly barren, not much more than a small camp bed at its center and a miniature fridge plugged into the far wall. There’s no dresser or furniture to be found, only a small pile of neatly folded clothes waiting in the corner. Dust collects on the windowsills, the counters free of clutter and nic-nacs. One thing is certain: the girl may be living here, but it’s far from a home. River might not consider her own flat to be cozy, but at least she had things. It was lived in. The majority of these accessories look secondhand, and River can’t help but wonder if the girl found or stole them from somewhere in the shop. If she was stealing, that would certainly explain why there was residue leaking off this place like a waste bin in the summer heat. But the question of how she got in here without River’s knowledge has yet to be answered. Is she a squatter? A spy? Something more malicious?

River's never been on to believe in coincidence. Her past has always been far too tangled in the web of fate to believe in things like chance. She keeps her eyes keen as she steps further into the room, noting the bed and it’s tucked-in sheets. The girl took the time to make it before she left, organized but clearly a minimalist. River would almost believe she was squatter if it weren't for the deliberate
lack of personal items. There's no mail or paperwork or weapons of any kind, absolutely nothing by which to identify her. River supposes she could swab the handle for prints, but she doubts that would be of use. Finger prints were only any good if one had a record, and it this girl is as sneaky as she seems, River doubts she'd be foolish enough to leave a paper trail. What she needs is DNA, blood or a spit swab or-

The mobile in River’s pocket buzzes, louder than it ought to be as it bounces off empty walls. When she removes it from her bag, River finds a message from Jack. The team is in position, their stakeout ready and waiting for her. River slips the device away, sparing one last glance around the shell of a room. Her vision stumbles over something black protruding from beneath the pillow. River pauses, a tingling in her bones drawing her toward the object. Creeping her way to the makeshift bed, River kneels down beside it, fingers curling around the curious object. It’s hard and plastic and when River slides it out from beneath the soft fabric, she finds it’s nothing more than brush.

A victorious smirk steals the corner of her mouth, twisting her lips upward. With two delicate fingers, River plucks a single strand of hair from the bristles.

“Gotcha.”
“I understand why you did it, all this,” Gwen continues. “Must be nice, having someone you’d give up everything for.”

The other woman’s eyes are distant and clouded with her own troubles. All River can think about is the cut on her forearm, the self inflicted wound that stands as trial for her child’s mortality. It’s scabbed over nicely, a small break in the skin she doubts anyone would notice. It’s funny how small things often hurt the worst. River’s hands fall to her stomach, because yes, “It’s rather magical having someone with whom you can’t live without, until you actually have to.”

Sorry I left you all hanging for so long. It’s about to get juicy, folks, I swear. As always, thank you for your patience and thank you to Cassie for the beta and the endless encouragement.

“Little did I know that today was only the start of everything getting very, very much worse.” - Gabrielle Williams

There’s a chill to the night air, the darkened New York skyline as smoggy as she remembers. What little she remembers of this, anyway. It’s all a bit of a blur, this first time she regenerated. Her younger self staggers slowly, pitifully down the dirty alley, and she can almost recall the way her lungs burned with every scratching cough.

She doesn’t remember what happens next, how she goes from a child in a dingy coat to a toddler in a containment cell. But she knows the events it sets in motion. Like watching dominoes as they fall: she hasn’t lived it yet, but she knows just how this story ends.

The hazards of peaking ahead, or rather, looking behind. Archaeology is tricky for time travelers. It blurs the line between past and future. But through the haze, she finally found what she was looking for- a hero, a legend, a man. She also found a prophecy hidden away in history books. She found
Utah and a lake and the space suit that haunts her dreams

A few meters away, a little girl coughs even as her tired feet carry her forward. River wonders if her younger self would be proud or disappointed to know that, even now, she’s still running.

Melody stumbles, her little legs nearly giving in, and River tampers down the urge to rush forward and scoop her younger self up in her arms. It would be so easy, to change it all, to move one piece of the puzzle and break the chain of events that will follow.

Her other self takes a determined step forward, toward her last breath, and River swears she can feel the way history is sliding into place. Her mind buzzes with the weight of timelines, fixed events like knots in the malleable strings of fate. It makes her nauseas, as if time were a tight rope and she’s straying from the ordained path. She takes a step forward, inching out from behind the corner she’s been using as a shield, almost entirely in view when-

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you.”

She’d know that voice anywhere. The sound of it never failing to send electricity sparking up her spine. Though she’s never seen his other faces, she imagines the splendor in his voice will always stay the same, just like him.

“Wouldn’t what?” River turns to face him, winging a knowing brow. “Help a dying child. Since when?”

He doesn’t deny it; the smirk he does a poor job of subduing is answer enough. Hands tucked into his trouser pockets, the Doctor saunters slowly towards her. He stands closer than she expects him to, and yet, she can tell he’s farther away than he’d like to be. It should probably make her uneasy, the liberties he takes. But rather than shy away from his presence, River finds herself relaxing under the weight of his light smile. He’s wearing his usual tweed, the cloth more tattered than when she saw last. It’s patchy and worn, and it’s funny, how he can manage to look so unassuming while smelling of explosives and outer space.

“How’s university?” he asks, tone too casual for their bleak surroundings, for car exhaust and old garbage and fluid rattling in a child’s lungs.

“Out of this world,” River deadpans, because if he can play this game, so can she. If he greets her like an old friend rather than his assassin, she can make light of moments that ought to break them.
The Doctor snorts, an invisible brow quirking when his eyes drop to her naked wrist. “How’d you get here?”

“I clicked my heels,” she evades him easily. Despite the amusement plucking at his cheeks, the man before her merely shakes his head. Honestly, it’s as if he thinks he’s the only one who knows how to borrow a space ship. “Is there a reason you’re interrogating me?”

“A bad girl like you?” He grins. “You’re bound to need interrogating for something.”

His hair flops over his eyes, a boyish charm shining out of old-man eyes, and it’s almost enough to make her forget why she came. The spell is broken by the sound of a thick, American accent.

“Little girl, are you okay?”

“It’s alright. It’s quite alright,” a quiet, scratchy voice replies. River turns from the Doctor, peaking around the corner to watch as her past comes alive before her very eyes. “I’m dying. But I can fix that. It’s easy, really.”

The first kiss of regeneration energy glows in her palm, a spark before a wild fire. River watches as a man she can almost remember bolts away, leaving her younger self alone once again. His footsteps slap against puddles gathered on stone ground as warm yellow radiates from tiny hands.

Though he hasn’t touched her, River feels the Doctor as he comes to stand by her side. Gold light consumes the alley, chasing away shadows and sickness. River is forced to look away, half blinded when she discovers the Doctor is watching her. He’s inches away, hazel eyes roaming her features like she’s a book he knows by heart. She blinks past the spots in her eyes and through them she swears she sees him smile. He’s quite breathtaking with amber hues dancing across his skin. It reminds her of Berlin, of poison and kisses and the promise of making one’s own destiny.

The light fades from his features as quickly as it came. When it does, River forces her eyes to look away, focusing instead on the place her younger self once stood. There’s a different child, no older than two, lying there now. She’s sleeping, still wrapped up in ragged, over-sized clothes. Everything inside River itches to walk toward her younger self, to scoop her up and tell her she’ll be safe. Beside her, the Doctor’s frame is tense, his jaw tight, and she wonders if he feels the same, if he’s fighting the urge to save her, to carry her away to Neverland the way ageless leaders do all lost children.
“Why are you here, Doctor?”

“I could ask you the same.”

“You're the time traveler that knows everything about me. You tell me.”

He works his jaw, considering. When he speaks, he does so tentatively. “Nasty business, paradoxes. Tampering with ones past, interacting with your self, there’s always side effects. Coming into physical contact with oneself has the worst repercussions. Causality really doesn’t like it. Sometimes you just lose your memory, but others…”

“You came here to stop me from saving myself,” River cuts him off, the sharp accusation hissing against cool night air.

“No,” he corrects quickly. “Never that. I came here so you don’t tear any holes in space time while you save yourself.” A small shrug as he amends. “If that’s what you choose.”

Her chest hurts and there’s an ache in the back of her skull and it almost sounds like justification as her voice cracks over, “I know where this path leads.”

“Yes,” he says, impassive and patient. “To your parents' house in Leadworth.”

“And your death,” River states, and she means for her words to sting. She expects them to wash over his expression like a slap to the face. But he remains stone, never flinching, as hard and as ancient as a granite mountainside.

The Doctor wets his lips, parting them. River silences him before he can speak.

“Don’t deny it.” It’s a demand, even as her hearts hope that he will. “I’ve been reading about it. Utah, fixed events.”

He openly laughs then, rich and musical and entirely at her expense. “Oh, River, is that what you’re
worried about?” He steps toward her, reaching up to brush a strand of hair from her face. “Fixed points can be rewritten.”

Her breath is locked behind stubborn lungs, eyes held captive by his crooked grin. He smiles like he’s got secrets just begging to be told. And maybe she already knows them. Maybe somewhere out there, they’re laughing about the time they nearly froze to death in a dingy New York alley because she didn’t yet know that time was their plaything.

A crackle of electricity is their only warning before a handful of clerics descend upon the small alley like a plague. They reek of vortex and meson fuel, and it’s the Doctor’s hand that guides her to safety, his warm palm on her shoulder that reminds her to step back into the shadows. They watch in silence as soldiers from her nightmares scoop up her sleeping self, a toddler limp in the arms of a zealot. It’s all too much, memories of her youth still sharp in her mind, the scars she wears ones that go deeper than skin.

River’s hand creeps toward her gun out of instinct. Fingers curl around metal as she levels her arm, pointing her blaster towards these men of God. The Doctor doesn’t stop her, but she pauses anyway, hesitating for reasons unknown. Her muscles twitch around a trigger she can’t bring herself to pull. It’s infuriating, that she can’t take their lives even though they’re so careless with hers.

The air in her lungs has grown thick and stale, and River whirls on the Doctor, huffing out a sound that’s more frustration than anger. “Why aren’t you stopping me?”

He answers her question with another, head tilting, face curiously blank. “Did you want me to?”

River slumps against the brick wall, the cool reprieve a sharp contrast from the warm metal in her hand. Unsure lips part around words she can’t form, and luckily for her, the Doctor finds them for her.

“Empathy isn’t something I can teach you. It’s already inside you, River. You’re not the psychopath they tried to make you. Your actions are your own. That’s what River Song means. Freedom to choose.”

Muffled voices from the other side of the brick wall tell her the future she knows is sliding into place, the history books remaining exactly as she left them. The man before her is calm, a placid, fixed thing in an ever-raging universe.
As for changing the past, well, you didn’t come here to save yourself. You did it to stop whatever it is you read about in a history book.” The Doctor’s ageless face softens as he traces the corners of her eyes, smiling as if, in all his long years, he’s never seen a gift more beautiful than her. “You wanted to save me. That’s compassion.”

He tries to justify her, as if he fails to see that selfish acts often disguise themselves as compassion when done to protect something one cares about, not that she’d ever admit such feelings to him. “Keeping myself out of the hands of monsters is hardly selfless.”

“Maybe so,” he shrugs, eyes alight like a guilty thief. “But even heroes get to be selfish sometimes, eh?”

“I’m not a hero.” River shakes away the ridiculous notion, even as the Doctor’s lips twitch.

“No?” It almost sounds like he’s taunting her as he nods toward her younger self. “You wanted to help her. Does it matter that it’s you or would you have helped anyone?”

And oh, he is good, because it feels like winning even as the nightmares of her youth steal her younger self away. A crack of lightning on a stormless night, and Melody is gone, the future set back into stone, paradoxical threats fizzing out, time settling like framing of an old house. The ache in River’s mind fades, the stress of timelines replaced by a promise of a future. Maybe she’s not a hero, but that doesn’t mean she can’t help. Maybe her past is worth it if she can save other little girls from fates like hers. Maybe by not pulling the trigger, she can be the person she always needed.

“Doctor, why are you here?” she breathes softly, and the man before her smirks.

“You already asked me that.”

“Tell me again, the truth this time.”

He’s quiet for a moment as he tears down his own walls. He reaches for her and she lets him take her hand in his, his thumb stroking softly over the sensitive dip in her wrist. Dark, ancient eyes bore into the heart of her as he confesses, “Whenever you jump, I’ll always catch you.” And it’s just another evasion, another half-truth wrapped in poetry until his grip tightens, pressing her palm to his chest. “And when you’re lost, I will always find you.”
“What do you mean you lost her?” River snarls, slipping into the waiting vehicle. If the door shuts with more force than necessary, Gwen doesn’t dare comment on it.

“She closed the shop early,” the woman explains, pulling away from the curb and onto the road. “We were able to tail her for a while, but we lost her on the high street just before sundown.”

River inspects her blaster, setting it to stun, just in case. “Where all did she go?”

“Coffee shop, off license, nowhere of note.”

"And where’s the rest of the team, being useful, I hope?"

"Tosh and Ianto are at the hub running diagnostics. Owen and Jack circled back near the TARDIS in case she resurfaces there. I figure we can patrol the usual high rift activity areas in the event she tries to tear any more holes in it. "

"No," River interjects, slow and calculated. "If she knows we're on her tail, she'll be expecting that.” Tucking her gun in her thigh holster, River reaches for her scanner. “There have been smaller inconsistencies all over the city. Lots of chrono-irregularities popping up near a take away not far from here. Let’s try there first.”

“A take away, really?”

River shrugs, “Even serial killers have to eat.”

A small smile plucks at Gwen’s lips even as she shakes her head, turning the car around.

It’s later in the evening, the long-set sun thinning the crowds along the high street. When they turn along a side road, pedestrians all but disappear, just street lamps and the bright fluorescent lights from the only open shop on the block.

“This is the place.” At River’s instructions, Gwen pulls the car to the side, parking a few doors down
from the building and cutting the engine.

The shop itself is an unassuming one, the synthetic yellow light that spills out onto the darkened path no different than any other chip shop in Cardiff. River double checks her scanner to be sure. There’s no doubt this is the place. Time flares burst around the small business like an infrared firework show. It’s the same breadcrumb trail she found in her block of flats as well as the TARDIS. Even though she has no idea as to why, it brings River a small dose of comfort to discover that the signatures popping up all over Cardiff are coming from a source besides her husband. She’d be happier still if the subject in question hadn’t been hovering around under her nose for the better part of a month, and River quietly scolds herself for ever letting such a thing slip past her watchful eyes.

A soft buzzing in her handbag steals her attention. River reaches for it, half expecting a message from Jack telling her he has the subject in custody. As it turns out, a different man entirely is after her attention, River’s hearts skipping a beat when she recognizes the TARDIS number displayed on her screen. A thrill shoots through her the way it always does when the Doctor calls, romance and danger taking spark in her veins. Which is why it’s all the more unexpected when she opens the message to read: What do you think of Archibald?

A laugh that never breaks her lips lightens River’s insides. That man, that impossible, ridiculous, unpredictable man, really does have the worst taste in baby names. River bites back a smile as she responds, over your dead body.

You could call him Archie for short! Comes his immediate reply, as if he’d been expecting her protests.

Knew a satyr named Archie once. River types. He always cheated at charades.

Well you certainly can’t name your son after anyone who would sully the good name of charades.

Even through written word, River can practically hear the indignance in his voice. It makes a fond smile curl her cheeks, and she’s about to put her mobile away when it buzzes again almost immediately.

What trouble have you found this evening?

And it’s all too familiar, her husband’s voice distracting her as she patiently waits for a target to show their face.
“What are we looking for?” her husband pesters.

River takes in a steadying breath, eyes never leaving her target as she exhales, “I am gathering intel on a potential smuggler. You are being a nuisance.”

“Oi!” he gasps, earning a few curious glances from three other patrons at the crowded bar. “I’m keeping you company, wife.”

“Drawing attention to us, more like.” When he has the gall to look offended, River rolls her eyes as she amends, “you’re very good at a great many things, Doctor, but being inconspicuous isn’t one of them.”

He pouts at her for that, batting long lashes over puppy-dog eyes. “Do you want me to go?”

River sighs again, irritation melting away. She reaches for his hand, their fingers lacing over the granite counter top. “I never want you to go, my love.”

He brightens then, a dog with a bone. The sweet talk buys her a few more moments of silence, and River cuts her eyes back toward the gangsters in the corner of the club when-

“So, are you almost done?”

River feels irritation spark once again, and she briefly contemplates just how angry he’d be with her later if she simply drugged him and sent him back to the TARDIS.

“Sweetie, if you’re bored, just go.” Her fingers untangle from his to slide along the neckline of her dress, where they both know she keeps her favorite poison nestled in her cleavage. “I’m a big girl. I can handle myself.”

The Doctor’s gaze follow her fingers, flushing when his eyes linger a moment too long.
“I’m not bored. I’m…” He stutters, cheeks turning a darker shade of crimson. River takes a slow sip of her wine, watching the spectacle that is her husband over the rim of her glass.

The lanky Time Lord shifts in his seat, his own thoughts making him bothered. For a man who’s so good with words, she does delight in rendering him speechless. “Something the matter, Sweetie?”

“Your dress is…” the Doctor huffs at the way she so blatantly revels in his suffering, “distracting.”

River arches an accusatory brow. “Says the man who’s done nothing but demand my attention even though I came here to do surveillance?”

“Yes, well,” he shifts in his seat again, his knee bouncing in that way it always does when he’s fit to bursting with unspent energy. “I thought you’d be done by now.”

River gives his knee a placating pat, her gaze searching the room for her target once again. In her peripheral vision, she sees the Doctor slide from his barstool. She’s certain he’s finally admitted defeat and intends to head back to the TARDIS when his tweed coat scratches against her shoulder.

The sudden contact earns him a curious glance, and as River looks up, she finds her husband staring down at her with darkened eyes. His jaw tenses like he’s steeling himself for taking on a Dalek fleet as he leans in close to whisper, “I thought I’d have you alone by now.”

The low rumble of his voice makes her insides tingle. River does her best to tame her smirk, flashing innocent eyes. “In a hurry, Doctor? Whatever for?”

Being so blatantly baited makes the Doctor growl, hissing a promise into her ear. “Come back to the TARDIS with me and I’ll show you.”

A grin that simply won’t be contained begins to crack her cheeks. River turns away, if for no other reason than she loves the way he chases her. “Bad guys won’t catch themselves,” she teases, smirking around another sip of wine.

“Time machine,” he mutters, and the warmth of his breath is the only warning she receives before he presses his lips to her neck, planting a single, lingering kiss. A shiver creeps down her spine even as a chuckle builds in the back of River’s throat, sultry and warm.
She twists to face him, pinning him in place with expectant eyes. The Doctor’s tongue snakes out to moisten his lips, and it’s criminal, how quickly his presence can make her forget everyone else in the room. Out of the corner of her eye, she’s vaguely aware of her target as he gets up from his booth, preparing to leave. River never looks away from the Doctor’s determined eyes as she strokes a single curious nail along her husband’s braces, plucking lightly at the red fabric. Even beneath his button up, she can feel how his stomach quivers at her touch. River smirks to see it, teeth biting into her bottom lip.

Reconnaissance can wait.

“He still adores you,” Gwen’s voice shatters River’s thoughts, and when she looks up, she finds the other woman’s gaze fixed on the curl in her cheeks.

“Yes, I suppose he does,” River answers stiffly, tucking her mobile away and clearing her throat as well as her mind.

Gwen isn’t so easily distracted. “It’s sweet that he's still so drawn to you. True love and all that.”

There was a time River would have scoffed at such a statement, that she never would have thought herself, much less the Doctor, capable of such an unlikely thing as love. It was a fanciful story no more true than frog princes or princesses in towers. Then she came to know Amy and Rory. She worked in the garden with Brian and starred in bar fights with Jack Harkness. She met the Doctor, and suddenly love didn’t seem so silly after all. Fanciful, yes, and improbable, too. But if a life of lies taught River Song anything, it’s that love is the one true thing there is.

“I understand why you did it, all this,” Gwen continues. “Must be nice, having someone you’d give up everything for.”

The other woman’s eyes are distant and clouded with her own troubles. All River can think about is the cut on her forearm, the self inflicted wound that stands as trial for her child’s mortality. It’s scabbed over nicely, a small break in the skin she doubts anyone would notice. It’s funny how small things often hurt the worst. River’s hands fall to her stomach, because yes, “It’s rather magical having someone with whom you can’t live without, until you actually have to.”

The words resonate like the last breath of a dying star, they hang from sad lips that echo a once
bright smile. River feels it, like a weight lifted, when Gwen’s eyes fall to her own lap. The other woman’s voice is more wary, more tender than it was a moment ago as she says, “You know, Jack almost insisted we do this stake out without you.”

River snorts, as if he could stop her. But Gwen’s confession sounds heavier than idle gossip, her statement hanging on the precipice of something more. “Why are you telling me this?”

Gwen shrugs, and when she finally brings herself to meet River’s gaze, her dark eyes are soft and filled to the brim with worry. “Stalking serial killers, shootouts with monsters. It’s not exactly safe.”

River huffs out a laugh at that because, “I’ve never been safe a day in my life.” It tastes bitter as it rolls off her tongue. It must sound that way too, because Gwen’s features soften to something akin to pity. It’s only when the other woman’s eyes drop pointedly to the precious cargo encased within her stomach that nausea sinks in.

“No matter how this goes down,” Gwen starts, “Just be careful, yeah? You know how insufferable Jack is when he’s right.”

They share in a laugh, but the sound of it is hollow as it rattles within the confines of the small car. River finds her mood lightened despite the heavy stone that’s made a home inside her gut. Her throat is too dry to speak, head too full for conversation. River distracts herself by training her eyes forward, scanning the streets. As the universe would have it, chance is a fine, fickle thing, because a figure rounds the corner, demanding their rapt attention.

“That’s her,” River confirms, and the woman beside her all but gapes.

“How did you know she’d be here?” Gwen questions, no small amount of awe in her voice.

River shrugs. “If there’s one thing a few hundred years of espionage has taught me, it’s that, generally speaking, people are predictable.”

River tosses Gwen a conspiratorial wink before turning her eyes back on Maddie, watching as the young girl enters the shop. A small bell clatters against glass, and the man behind the counter offers a familiar smile as she approaches; definitely a regular then.

“That’s odd,” Gwen offers, brow furrowed. “Her clothes are different.”
“How do you mean?”

“Well, when she left the shop an hour ago, she was in a dress, had a backpack, too. Now she’s in jeans and a jumper. She must have stopped to change.”

“You must be mistaken,” River corrects. “That’s what she wore this morning.”

Gwen’s brow climbs her forehead. “Are you saying she changed twice?”

“I’m not sure,” River’s once confident voice trails off, suddenly uneasy. A nagging feeling has returned to her gut, and her suspicions are only confirmed when Owen’s voice crackles over the radio.

“Got her. She’s down by the bay.”

Gwen reaches for the com device before River can, delighting in a chance to correct her teammate. “No you don’t. We have.”

Owen responds in kind, derision dripping from his whiny London accent. “I’m looking right at her,” he snarks. “So unless there’s two of them..”

River’s hearts nearly stutter, a quick hand reaching across the car to snag the radio from Gwen. “What’s she wearing?”

The man on the other end of the line chokes on a laugh. “Sorry?”

“Answer the question,” River demands, rolling her eyes.

He groans in contemplation, voice dimming slightly as he no doubt lowers the device to get a better look. “Sundress or summat? A backpack. Same thing as before. Does it matter?”
River swallows, realization sinking like a stone in fresh water as she and Gwen share a meaningful glance. “That’s what I thought.” River’s watchful eyes break from Gwen’s in time to see Maddie open the door of the shop with her dominant hand. “Owen, is her arm hurt?”

“How should I know?” he scoffs.

“Has she been favoring her left arm?”

“Yeah. I guess. Opening doors and stuff.”

Green eyes cut back to Gwen as she reluctantly says, "He’s got the right one." Holding up the device again, River commands, “Don’t lose her.”

"Wasn’t planning on it," Owen quips. “Care to tell me what the hell is going on?"

“When I saw her this morning, she was injured. Some kind of hiking accident,” River explains, a dubious snort as she rectifies, “or so she says.”

Gwen’s doe eyes blow wide as her gaze ping-pongs between River and their target, her brain finally catching up as she exclaims, “Are you saying there is two of them? Who is this then? Body double?”

Eyes still locked on their target, River puts her assassin eyes to use, studying the girl for inconsistencies. She appears exactly the same apart from her uninjured arm and unscratched jumper. "She must have a ganger or a duplicate or a-"

"Twin?" Jack finally sees fit to chime in, a devious inflection in his voice.

"I hope it's that simple,” River sighs. “Stay on her, boys.”

Any untoward replies from Jack are lost as River sets aside the radio, all her attention now trained on the girl across the road. Maddie pauses as she exits the shop, not entirely suspect, but there’s a slight linger as she looks down the road in the direction in which she came, before straightening her jacket and heading the other way.
Gwen reaches for the keys to start the car, but River places her hand over Gwen’s, steadying her. "Wait," she says and they watch with baited breath as the girl nears the end of the road. Her steps are quick, but not suspiciously so, and she’s a couple blocks away, only a few paces from the corner, when River finally lowers her hand, granting permission. "Okay, now."

The car starts with a low rumble, pulling out onto the nearly deserted street as Maddie turns the corner. Gwen increases the speed, slowing only as she reaches the end of the street. As they stop at the intersection, River’s eyes look out the side window, seeking out the direction the young girl is heading. The street corner is barely in view when River spots a discarded plastic bag, spilt takeaway staining the walking path. Half a heartbeat later, green eyes fix on the lean figure now bolting down the street.

"She's running!" River shouts, and Gwen’s foot slams against the gas pedal, launching them around the corner and down the road.

The girl moves like she’s done this before, a life on the run nothing new for her quickly retreating feet. Maddie makes a hard left, cutting across traffic without a care for the passing cars. Gwen hits the breaks, preparing to follow on foot. River’s unbuckled and out of the car before Gwen can put it in park. There are protests on the other woman’s lips, angry Welsh curse words, demands to wait, but River barely hears them, her feet already hitting the pavement.

She moves as fast as the bump beneath her shirt will allow, following the young girl as she zigzags across the street. It’s not long before Gwen is on her heels, catching up with River easily in her current state. Their target never turns, never stops to look behind. She runs like her life depends on it, cutting down a side street and disappearing into an alleyway.

“IT’s a dead end,” Gwen pants, picking up speed like a woman who already tastes victory. “We got her.”

A prickling on River’s spine warns her it won’t be so easy, that things hardly ever are. Gwen has no such reservations, and the Welshwoman acts before River can stop her, rounding the corner of the alley first. Blaster fire ricochets off stone the moment Gwen’s foot breaks cover. Another quick-fired shot nearly earning Gwen another belly button. The woman’s only saving grace some fancy footwork and a spot of luck as she dives behind a dumpster, taking cover.

River takes her post against the wall, the alley hidden from her view. Gwen lays some blind cover fire, her contemporary gun making for a harsh contrast to the sizzling of meson bursts. Shots explode erratically, sparking off metal and stone, and in the brief reprieve between shots, River can hear the rattling of a fence. The cornered target’s breath is erratic and panicked, and Gwen’s only just
manages to get off another shot, her bullet hissing against the fence, when River hears Maddie shout, “Stay away from me, you psychopath!”

The girl is furious and terrified and maybe it’s the thrill of the hunt that takes over River’s limbs, because before she knows it, she’s throwing caution to the wind, stepping out from behind her shelter. River abandons the stone wall at her back to peak around the corner and into the alley way. Maddie is there at the back, squirming like a mouse caught in a trap.

There’s a weapon in the young girl’s right hand, archaic and lethal. Despite the fear in her voice, her hand doesn’t tremble against the trigger. River swears it all happens between one beat of her hearts and the next, because that feeling in her gut has returned, unease eating her from within. River’s icy stare locks with her target, the girl’s jaw slackening as River takes aim.

Maddie hesitates.

River doesn’t.

The girl lets out a sharp gasp of pain as the blaster fire connects with her forearm of her dominant hand. It’s a small flesh wound, barely enough to singe the fabric of her jumper. But it’s enough to send her weapon clattering to the ground, out of reach.

"Nice one!" Gwen offers, and the other woman’s voice is like static in River’s ears as she watches a wide-eyed Maddie reach for her other wrist. "I think you disarmed her."

River tenses, her trigger finger at the ready. “We don’t want to hurt you. We just have some questions.”

The girl freezes, hand still on her wrist, chest heaving as her eyes drift to the grim weapon just out of reach. Maddie’s jaw sets. “He has to be stopped,” are the only words the girl speaks before she disappears in a crackle of smoke.

The declaration, the threat, hangs in the air like a noose. Silence in the empty alleyway rings like the chop of an executioner’s block. The stench of vortex fills her nose, and River turns away, nauseous for entirely new reasons. Beside her, Gwen is already on her feet, marching towards the place the target had stood.
“Looks like she left something behind.” Gwen takes a knee by the weapon, tucking away her own gun and slipping on a glove so as to avoid contamination.

River follows, eyes skirting over the weapon before fixing on their surroundings. It’s empty, quiet, not even the distant sounds of sirens to add melody to the night. A cool breeze stirs the air around her, and River breathes in the acrid smell of shattered spacetime.

“It wasn’t a far jump, judging by the static,” River observes, sampling the surrounding neutrinos. “But why didn’t she use the manipulator to begin with? Why try and ambush us only to change her mind?”

“Maybe she realized she was outgunned?” Gwen suggests, her careful attentions focused on the object in her hand.

“Maybe,” River trails off, thoughts spinning around a piece to the puzzle she can’t quite find. *He has to be stopped* stings like citrus on an open wound, and River’s hand falls protectively to her stomach. “She had a shot on me and she hesitated. Why?”

Gwen shrugs. “Why’d she call you a psychopath?”

River huffs, a bitter, self-deprecating sound. “She wouldn’t be the first.”

“Well, here’s hoping the fellas have better luck with the other her.”

River’s eyes roam back to Gwen, to the weapon in the other woman’s hands. It’s sharp and sleek and deadly, built for a purpose River doesn’t dare name. A deep breath drags out of her lungs instead, confessing, “Something tells me that they won’t.”

“At least you managed to get a shot on her,” Gwen offers as solace, and suddenly everything slides into place, time lines settling like tectonic plates after a quake as

*River smells the lie on her, feels how it coagulates in the air, and as she studies the frayed fabric Maddie tries to hide, she can’t help but notice how the ruined cloth looks more like a burn than a scratch or a tear.*
“I know where she went,” River gasps, and Gwen’s wide eyes snap to her in disbelief.

“Where?”

“The TARDIS,” River sighs, the night air heavy with consequence. “Sometime before eleven a.m. this morning.”

X

River’s never been fond of small spaces, which made tomb raiding a trial at the best of times. But it’s never been something she had to worry about here. The Hub’s high ceilings and open floor plan were enough to distract her from the fact they were a dozen meters underground. And yet, as she stands shoulder-to-shoulder with the Torchwood team, six pairs of eyes staring down at the rather gruesome looking alien technology, River can’t help but feel a little trapped.

"Definitely the murder weapon,” Tosh announces, hypnotized by the alien markings. “It looks almost... ritualistic."

River shivers at the word. Religious radicals are always the most difficult with which to deal. Jack must detect the tremors in her frame the way animals sense danger, because he keeps his distance, tone low and even.

“Do you recognize it?” her friend asks, and the slightest shake of her head is all the answer River gives.

"I thought you were an archaeologist," Owen snorts. “Were you sick that day?”

"It’s a big universe,” River starts, deceptively calm as cold eyes turn, green as they are deadly and infinitely more frustrated as they fix on the source of her displeasure. “And if I wasn't in class, it’s far more likely I was assassinating someone.”

The psychopath in her eyes must be nearer to the surface than she usually lets it stray, because the
weird of a man finds an excuse to slink away, muttering about a pizza run. The rest of the team looks anywhere but at her, busying themselves with the various nicknacks that clutter their desks. A hand that could only be Jack’s finds the small of her back. It’s meant to soothe her, she knows, but all it does is give her anger a point on which to focus.

“And you,” River whips around. “Still think I’m paranoid, Jack?”

“You’re right. I should have listened to you sooner.”

“Yes, you should have,” she snaps. “You should have told me about the killings, too, but instead you let her sneak around under our noses for a bloody month.”

It’s hard to tame her voice when her insides are sizzling like a frying pan left on the heat for too long, hard not to shout until her lungs are empty when the air that fills them is so musty and stale. It’s only when she stops to breathe again that she finds a noticeable hush has fallen over the room. The silence only fuels her, anger boiling in her blood over things she can’t control. She fights back with things she can, making demands in a tone harsh enough to put a mortal man’s tail between his legs.

“I was right not to trust her,” River scoffs. “This was close, too close. I want this whole city monitored. CCTV in every building, every passing police car, even the local's Instagram stories. I want to know who the hell she is and why she’s here, and I want it by morning.”

“You’re right, and I’m sorry. I know you’re upset—"

“Damnit, Jack!” River sucks in a calming breath as she turns away, the Torchwood team suddenly scared for Jack’s immortal life, because the oncoming storm is nothing compared to his missus. River blinks past halogen lights and a rage that seems to blind her as she whispers, “She lives in my building.”

Her friend’s eyes widen and his hand closes around her bicep, tighter than she’d usually allow as he begins leading her down the hall and away from prying ears.

"What?" he hisses, just as flabbergasted as she had been. He isn’t enough of a hypocrite to scold her about keeping things to herself, but she hears it in the frayed edges of his voice, the way his words sounds like why didn’t you tell me sooner?
"John, er, the Doctor, he told me earlier tonight," River explains, frustration making her voice jagged. "She lives in my complex. How did I overlook this? I researched that whole bloody block before moving in there. Nothing happens in those flats without my knowledge."

It tastes bitter, the thought that she's getting sloppy and short sighted, that she's losing her touch. Her self doubt must be palpable, or perhaps her friend can just read her better than she likes to admit, because Jack’s grip on her arm loosens, his palm sliding up to rest on her shoulder.

“No need to panic just yet,” Jack interjects. “If she wanted the Doctor, she could have had him by now, yeah?”

“I’m not entirely sure it’s him she’s after,” River surmises, dread and suspicion dripping off her tongue in equal measure. “The signatures popping up all over the city are hers; it’s how I found her so easily tonight. And when we cornered her,” River hesitates, all her fears catching in her throat. “She said, ‘he needs to be stopped.’ Could she… do you think she knows about the prophecy?”

River’s eyes find Jack’s, searching and desperate in a way she’ll never admit to. Jack offers her comfort the only way he can, derailing one nightmare for another. “Unless she knows about the watch? Maybe she doesn’t want it open. Why else would she sneak around the TARDIS if she wasn’t looking for something?”

River bristles at the very thought, unsure which theory makes her tremble more.

“On the bright side,” Jack continues, a levity to his encouraging words. “Whatever she’s playing at, she wants the Doctor alive.”

“Still,” River huffs, eyes boring holes into the corner of the room. Various relics clutter the shelves like the back warehouse of a 53rd century museum, and there was time where the sight of dust and dingy artifacts would have brought her peace. Now it only brings her fear and the thought of a fob watch left treacherously close to the hands of a thief. “I should have seen this coming.”

A steadying hand on her shoulder gives a squeeze, and River glances up into the ancient eyes of her closest friend. “You’re not alone in this,” Jack reminds her gently, stop acting like it shinning in his sea-blue eyes.

River let’s out a long sigh, exhausted but far from defeated. “I know.”
A moment of stillness settles over the room like fog on a winter morning. It’s cold and quiet and content, Jack’s voice like sunshine desperately trying to break through the clouds. “So,” her friend starts slowly, sentiment carried on a heavy exhale, ”how you doing, Song?”

“I’m fine,” River answers, a bit too clipped, and Jack must see straight through her, because his handsome face twitches knowingly until River deflates. “I’m worried. How could she give us both the slip? Who is this girl?”

“No one the infamous River Song can’t handle,” Jack smirks, and when she relents with a half hearted smile and a puff of laughter, he continues. “Take a breath. We’ll figure it out. ”

River does as she’s told, taking in a deep, calming breath. Her hearts cease their racing but the weight on her chest doesn’t fade, because as strong and soothing as her friend's touch may be, they aren’t the hands for which she longs. Giving a nod, River steps away, his hand falling from her shoulder, a lifeline left behind as River comes to a stop by Tosh’s desk.

The girl is wide eyed and nervous in the way most humans are when she stands just a little too close. River pretends not to notice how the other woman’s worry gives way to curiosity as River withdraws a small baggie from her belt, passing it to her. Tosh frowns as she takes it, squinting to see the single dark hair encased inside.

“I got this off the culprit,” River explains. “See what DNA you can get out of it. It might give us some clue as to who or what we’re dealing with.”

Tosh barely has time to nod before River turns on a dime. “Where are you going?” Jack calls after, his deep voice echoing around the stone walls.

River offers no second glances, her pace neither faltering nor slowing as determined feet carry her towards the exit. “To get that watch.”
A gift and a thief

Chapter Summary

“We're closed,” she hears his familiar voice call. A smile plucks at River's lips as she knocks again, more insistent this time. She could speak to him, she knows, but it's far more entertaining to imagine the pout on his face as he huffs and stomps towards the door. “You’ll have to come back tomor—“

The barrier between them swings open, his irritated tone catching in his throat as River stares up at him with a soft, knowing smile.

Chapter Notes

As some of you may have noticed, I’ve upped the rating to M. Many chapters from now, A Scene will happen. But I also don’t want to have catfished anyone, so if you're already invested in this story and would take offense to such a chapter, let me know now and I’ll try to accommodate you as best I can. As always, thank you for the feedback :)

“Surprise is just a paradox. Sometimes it annoys us; sometimes it shakes the tears of joy within us; sometimes it makes us ponder; sometimes it ceases our words and leaves our jaws open, and sometimes, it shuts our lips; for a moment, surprises can put our minds into a state of confusion and halt the movement of the body.” - Ernest Agyemang

She doesn’t take the bus, not tonight, not when her head is dizzy with worry. A tornado of clues and questions and facts swirl round and round and round inside her head so fast a less practiced individual would be gasping for breath. River’s thoughts spin with red cloaks and prophecies that may as well be threats. Her fears prance across the forefront of her mind, her nightmares come alive in the form of a pretty face and a ritualistic weapon.

She’ll be long gone now, River’s almost certain of it. It’s what she would do if her cover was blown, buy herself a few hours with the vortex manipulator, gather the essentials, and ghost. It would
explain the backpack she wore, why she was snooping about the TARDIS, too. And there's a thought, because, why would the Old Girl even allow that? Even powered down as she was, she had some level of sentience still. Why would she allow a stranger in?

Then again, if this girl was clever enough to go undetected by River, it’s possible she could fool the TARDIS too. The real question is, why would she want to? Why would she need to? Is that why she was leaking energy all over Cardiff? And more importantly, if she's after the Doctor, why waste time by going on a killing spree? Why bother with minnows when there’s a white whale right under your nose?

“Practice makes perfect,” Rory chimes, rocking a plastic doll back and forth in his arms.

Mels snorts, legs thrown over the arm of a chair and a bottle of Pimms in her hand. “But I don’t need to practice, coz I’m never having kids, am I?”

“Mels with a kid,” Amy laughs, struggling to secure a nappie around her wiggling, battery operated infant. “Can you imagine it?”

“Where is your doll, anyway?” Rory asks, and it’s only a school project, but it makes Mels sick, how effortlessly Rory holds a child in his arms.

She swallows down the feeling with another gulp of Pimms. The liqueur only make her mouth dry, and Mels sets the bottle aside as she answers. “Hid it in the headmaster's desk drawer.”

“Mels!” her parents shriek in unison. Rory is positively aghast while Amy looks almost proud at her complete disregard for authority.

“You’re going to get expelled, do you know that?” Rory scolds her, and Mels' lips quirk.

“One can only hope.”

Amy laughs in that way she always does when Mels does something naughty. It's almost as if she can't help herself, a puff of Scottish laughter ripped from her lungs. Mels would be a liar to say she didn't show off from time to time just to hear it. Unfortunately for Amy, the mechanical child in her
arms doesn't seem as keen. The torture device lets out a robotic cry, and Amy's moon-like face turns impressively paler.

"Rory!" the redhead panics, but Mr. Perfect is on his way before the summons even leaves her lips. One sleeping doll already cradled in his care, Rory uses his free hand to scoop up the lump of plastic Amy is currently thrusting in his direction. He rocks the pretend infant slowly, soothing it. Amy hovers nearby, anxiety and awe battling for control of her face as Rory quiets the doll.

Mels' smile is gone, replaced by a crude grimace. She loves being best mates with her parents, she really does. But sometimes, when she really looks at them,

It feels as if she’s swallowed a storm cloud, the weight of her reality dark and heavy on her chest. It sizzles and churns as if the bottom will fall out at any moment. And maybe it will, maybe the Sisterhood is right. Maybe the whole universe feels the strain of her child's existence. Maybe every day he grows, the prophecy surrounding him builds like a static charge. Maybe this girl is the first in a long line of would be fortune tellers hellbent on keeping history on its rightful path.

Or perhaps she's after something else entirely, something yet to be seen. It takes a certain amount of precision, of skill, of patience, to follow through with a plan. If there's one thing that's strikingly clear, it's that she's calculated, this Maddie person. She has the self-control to wait, to bide her time. She didn't pull the trigger when she could have, and a small voice in the back of River's mind can't help but wonder if she's here to stop the storm or simply ride the waves.

Either way, she has to warn the Doctor, not about everything, of course. Heaven knows that man never did meet a trap he didn't long to spring. Should he let her close enough to find it, the watch is a temptation she can remove without his notice. She should have been the one to keep it safe all long, but the Doctor had insisted he look after it. Her husband was sentimental like that, wanting to hold onto a piece of himself even when he's slipped into a different skin. She could hardly blame him, and River never could say no to that man when he flashed her his saddest eyes. So, she caved. She let him keep his trinket in spite of her better judgement.

But the time for romanticism has passed. Now danger overshadows his somewhat tender disposition. With any luck, she'll be able to swipe the watch without his notice. And her curious, oblivious husband opening it and leading the Time Lords straight to them before they're ready will be one less thing for River to worry about. News of his assistant, on the other hand, will take a much more direct approach.

It's nearly midnight by the time she reaches the TARDIS. It rather suits the Old Girl, the disguise of a tattered secondhand shop. The lights downstairs still burn bright, casting an otherworldly glow onto
the empty street. The curtains are pulled closed but she can see the shadow of the Doctor’s form pacing around inside. It’s a bit late to be up and about, but her husband never really was one for healthy sleeping schedules.

Just the sight of him is enough to tame her scattered thoughts. River sets the past and the future aside. Living in the moment has always been the best way to keep her head above water in the raging rapids that is their life together. Now is no exception, and River does what a life of lying has taught her to do. She tucks her worry away in a box to be opened at a later date as she readies herself to do what needs to be done.

She can hear him, clattering around inside, as she approaches the door. He’s safe and sweet and stumbling around their TARDIS the way he’s done countless times before. His mere proximity is a comfort, a salve washing over her mind, and River can’t help but melt a little as she lifts a hand and knocks lightly on the door.

“We're closed,” she hears his familiar voice call. A smile plucks at River's lips as she knocks again, more insistent this time. She could speak to him, she knows, but it's far more entertaining to imagine the pout on his face as he huffs and stomps towards the door. “You’ll have to come back tomor-“

The barrier between them swings open, his irritated tone catching in his throat as River stares up at him with a soft, knowing smile.

“River,” he beams, her own reflection shinning back at her through his eyes as the annoyance in his voice immediately melts into delight. “I thought you said you had to work tonight?”

The warmth of the TARDIS and the smooth pane of his chest have a gravitational pull unlike any other. She’s lost count of the times she’s stumbled or flown through these doors into his waiting arms. “I did,” River says, fighting the urge to sway into him as she corrects, “I am… can we talk for a minute?”

She must be doing a poor job of hiding the worry buried beneath her half-smile, because the man before her glances over her shoulder, out into the street, suddenly wary. “Is everything alright?”

“Yes,” she answers as reflex, and when his eyes only scrunch in confusion, River sighs, “Well, no, actually. Can I come in?”

“Of course.” His gangly limbs practically trip over themselves to make room for her to walk past.
River steps into the shop gladly, the TARDIS’ welcome a faded, warm hum against her mind. The door closes behind her, and she can feel hazel eyes burning into her back even as her own gaze drifts across the shop. Nothing appears to be missing, though it’s hard to know for certain given the state the ship is in. The front desk is more cluttered than normal. An array of gadgets and glue and what might be a miniature propeller are scattered around the register, and River smirks around the question, "Taking up model plane building, are we?"

Green eyes cut back to her husband, finding him still hovering near the door. His gawking eyes haven’t left her person and her question makes him blink in confusion until River nods in the direction of the crafts littering his desk. "Oh! Right! Yes," he blurts, remembering his feet enough to rush back to the desk and shove his creation into the corner, out of view. There's a blush creeping up those deliciously sharp cheeks, and River bites back a smirk as her husband clears his throat. "It's nothing. Just a bit of tinkering. What did you want to talk about?"

Her amusement drains instantly, her shoulders slumping but her voice a practiced calm as she explains, “We’ve had some… disturbances around this area. I wanted to make sure you were okay.”

“Fit as a fiddle, me,” he grins, leaning against the counter. His forearms flex as he does so, and River allows her eyes to linger there for a heartbeat or three. She’s always did like it when he rolled his shirt sleeves up.

Closer inspection reveals that his vest is askew, his button-up half escaped from the trousers the way it always does when he’s too busy focusing on a task to bother re-tucking it. River takes a deliberate step closer, treading carefully as she observes, “You’re up awfully late.”

His eyes break from hers to scratch at a spot on the counter, and it almost sounds more like an alibi than an explanation as he says, “Been at my knitting class.”

Maybe it’s just the chill that always befalls her when deprived of his undivided attention, or perhaps it’s the paranoia still running rampant in her veins, but the air in the room changes. He seems distracted, his nervous tongue wetting lips like he’s priming them to speak words he's too afraid to say.

“And your assistant?” River presses, studying his face as she takes another step closer. "What’s she up to this evening?"

That seems to draw his attention, fixing him in the now and banishing all other thoughts. Her
husband looks up at her from over the safety of the counter, a curious pinch in his brow. “Maddie? She left ages ago. Had some nightly errands to run.”

“What sort of errands?”

“I dunno, really. Young people things. Scones, probably. Doesn’t matter, listen, I was wondering—”

“She's not who she says she is,” River blurts out before he can change the subject, and the man before her stops short, brow furrowing.

"Sorry?"

"Maddie, I have reason to suspect she's behind the extraterrestrial activity."

"Why? What happened?"

“I ran into her tonight. She had a gun.” His hazel eyes double in size at the statement and the words burn River’s throat as she continues, “We believe it’s a murder weapon.”

"Murder?" he bursts out, nearly laughing, incredulous at such a thought because- “Maddie? There must be some mistake,” he insists, dismissing her. "She'd never hurt a fly."

River bites her tongue to keep from snapping, from hissing out explanations about car chases and shoot outs he’ll only scold her for later. She doesn’t tell him how she locked eyes with this girl as she pulled the trigger. She spares him the details, and tells herself it isn’t because she’s afraid he’ll take the word of a fresh-faced spy over her.

River softens, the fire in her eyes dulling to a simmer, unsure which one of them she pitsies as she asks, "How long have you even known her?"

"A few months,” he admits, and he looks so sure of himself as he continues, “but I’ve got a way with people. I can always spot the good ones.”
River holds her ground, exhaling past an emotion she can’t name and countering, "Last week you thought aliens were a fiction. Forgive me if I don’t trust your judgment."

Still, her husband doesn’t want to see sense, stepping around the counter to meet her head on as he folds his arms across his chest. "She’s a good kid: clever, funny, bit scary at times. Reminds me of you, actually."

"Yeah, well," River gives a bitter laugh at his attempted flattery, because, as a former assassin and psychopath, that’s exactly what she’s afraid of. “I know lots of people like me. We’re not very trustworthy."

Her eyes break from his to worry a hole in a cabinet just beyond his shoulder. She isn’t sure how she expected this to go, if part of her hoped he’d fall back into old habits he doesn’t remember, that he’d take her word as gospel. Of course he wouldn’t blindly believe her. He has no reason to-

"I trust you," her husband’s voice disturbs the air, and when River’s eyes automatically seek out his face, she finds that he’s smiling, bright and open and so very, very malleable.

His words are her worst nightmare and exactly what she hoped for all wrapped up in the same soft exhale. He's succumb to the gravity between them that he feels, has always felt, even since before he knew who she was. Against his better judgement, he let her close enough to kill him, twice. Even now, be it residual memory or just the turn of the universe, he’s drawn to her for reasons he can’t explain. He’s always been drawn to danger like a moth that loves to burn. River let’s out a tired sigh, "My point exactly."

"I'm not worried." He shrugs, chipper and careless and completely oblivious to the irony of his words as he says, "You haven't shot me yet. Something tells me Maddie won't either."

“This is serious, John,” River admonishes. It claws at her throat every time she calls him that, but she pushes onward, burying the pain behind something far more paramount. “Promise me you’ll tell me if she comes back here. It’s…” River falters, voice strained by secrets, “more important than you know.”

He doesn’t answer immediately, not like he once would have. There were days he trusted her with his whole life, with everything, where he would offer his soul to her on platter and she’d never even have to ask. She could say jump and his feet would leave the floor before his lips could ask how high. There were moments when spoilers evaporated between them because the past and the future made no difference to him so long as she stayed in his arms, so long as they had now.
There were days she treated his promises as law, as sacred, fixed things that nothing and no one could stop or break or change. He isn’t that man now, not his fault; it never has been. And River tries her best not to let it hurt, to guard her hearts from calculating eyes as the Doctor’s voice sighs out,

*Trust you, seriously?*

“Under one condition,” his face is skeptical, and River offers herself the way she always has, a lamb eager for sacrifice.

“Name it.”

His cheek twitches in spite of his carefully blank expression, a challenge as much as it is an invitation as he says, “Have dinner with me.”

It’s hardly the offer she was expecting and River chokes on a disbelieving laugh. "What? Now?"

He shrugs. “You're here. Might as well.”

She shouldn’t. Staying would be terrible, wonderful, delicious, dangerous idea. She knows better than to tempt herself, knows that too much time spent with him is risky. She knows he'll be angry with her later for not keeping away, but then Jack’s words: *You don’t have to break any headboards*, echo in the back of her mind like the devil himself on her shoulder. River bites her bottom lip, teeth sinking into rosy flesh like Eve into an apple, because she really is starving. She hasn’t eaten food that wasn’t made by Ethan in far too long. Resolve already crumbling, River gives the only half-hearted protest she can form. “It’s nearly midnight.”

It’s a statement of fact that makes for a thinly-veiled excuse, and the man before her wiggles his invisible brows as he teases, “Why's that a problem? Afraid you’ll turn into a pumpkin?”

River laughs, hand falling to her stomach. “Already done that, I’m afraid.”

“Then what’s the harm?” He bats his hazel eyes, offering up the same tempting smile she's followed into warzones and alien worlds. “I promise I’m not a fire hazard, not much of one anyway.”
His grin is much too tempting, the likes of which has lured many a lost soul onto his ship. His crooked smile is a poison she loves to take. Danger has always been her favorite drug, and she tastes the fallout of a reckless decision on her tongue the way she does when she dances too close to fixed events. It sparks, an electric warning nipping at her lips even as they sigh out, “Alright.”

The agreement makes him brighten, sunshine on a face that was expecting night. The lanky man before her jumps to attention, standing straighter as eager hands right his vest. "Right, good, excellent,” he stutters as if his own would be plans have come as a surprise to him. "We'll just, uh, follow me!"

"You want to have dinner here?" River's green eyes widen, because dinner was one thing, but being alone with him in his flat was a pandora's box of delectable trouble.

Her date for the evening seems quite delighted by the idea, practically skipping toward the stairs on the balls of his feet. "As you said, it's nearly midnight. Everywhere else will be closed."

He waits for her on the bottom step, tidying himself by rolling his shirtsleeves back down and buttoning the cuffs. He always dresses up for their dates, but the best thing by far that he wears is a grin. River wonders if he knows what the sight of him does to her, if he knows his giddy demeanor never fails to make her weak in the knees. It's her legs that betray her in the end, carrying her towards the treacherous honey trap that of a husband that hardly knows her.

He spins around, certain that she'll follow, and when he thinks she isn’t looking, she catches him smoothing down his floppy, untamable hair. River smiles down at her feet at the sight of it, and oh, the trouble this will get her in is already worth it. The steps creak and though it’s been months since she last climbed these stairs, it may as well have been minutes. She remembers the details of this room the way she does the walls of her old prison cell, with fondness as much as scorn. A home though it was, a prison is still a prison.

The Doctor rounds the landing and River follows after as he opens the door and steps into a his flat. She’s surprised and somewhat delighted to see that he’s made changes. He never could keep still, her husband. Forever the tinkerer, and it brings a smile to her face to notice that he’s moved around the furniture. More than once if the scuffs on the floor are any indication.

His purple coat is tossed over the back of the settee. A stack of barely-touched newspapers wait on the dining room table, and in the corner sits a pile of what can only be his experiments in knitting. There’s even a television, next to it, a stack of DVDs and a player that looks as if it’s barely been used. She can taste the way Sunday afternoons drag by like a pot that won’t boil. She can feel the routine of waking up early and sneaking a sweet before bed settle on skin like a warm blanket. As
odd as it seems, it feels like him, like what their lives would have become if the universe didn’t so love to tear them apart.

“How do you feel about omelets?” he chimes, closing the door behind her.

“At this point, I’ll settle for anything not made by a robot.”

"Then you've come to the right place!” he beams, heading for the kitchen with all the excitement of an artist whose just been blessed by a muse. Long legs allow him to cross the room in a few large strides, and by the time River makes it to the kitchen, she finds him bent over, head half-buried in the fridge as he offers, “Would you like a drink?”

Quite enjoying the view his small behind has to offer, River coos longingly, “I’d love a whisky or some wine.”

“I have grape juice!” he declares triumphantly, popping upright once more. “Close enough.”

“But no cigar,” she sighs, and there’s something else she hasn’t indulged in in far too long. She watches as he pours her a glass of wasted grapes, taking it gladly. Bringing the plastic cup to lips and swirling the liquid inside, River hums. “All the fruit and none of the fun.”

“Nonsense, we can have plenty of fun.”

“Oh? Before or after dinner?” River bites back a smirk, but her innuendo goes unnoticed as her husband claps his hand together excitedly.

“Dinner is the fun,” he declares with pride, and River murmurs into her beverage.

“Pity.” The grievance is swallowed by clattering as her husband sets about his task, already shoulder deep in a cabinet as he searches for a frying pan.

The cracking of eggs and clanking of pans is a melody she’s heard many times before. River turns away, taking another moment to look around while he busies himself in the kitchen. Fingers dancing along the back of his sofa, she pictures him falling asleep, feet dangling over the arm and one of his
magazines still half clutched in his hand. The side table is crooked and she wonders how many times his careless feet have stubbed themselves by rounding the corner too quickly.

River's steps are slow ones as she makes her way across the room, wandering over to the pile of DVDs. One sits half opened and she’s surprised to find it’s a used version of—“Indiana Jones?” River announces, more disbelief than curiosity as she holds the case up for him to see. “Why do you own these?”

“They’re classics,” he argues. ”Why wouldn't I own them? The cinematography is brilliant.”

The used DVD still in one hand, River swallows around a sip of her grape juice, eyes dancing and full of secrets. "Not because he's an archaeologist, then?"

Her date scoffs. “Archaeologists are boring, glorified dirt diggers.”

River gives an impartial hum, placing the case back on the shelf.

“Now Lara Croft on the other hand,” he speaks up, demanding her attention once more. "She's something. The Tomb Raider movies themselves, they're cheesy, awful things, but Lara Croft. Now there’s an explorer that knew what they were doing.”

“You sound as if you fancy her,” River teases, watching him over her shoulder.

There's a playful smile on his lips, something warm and personal tugging at his cheeks as he barks out, “Well, who wouldn't? She has a gun and she really doesn't mind shooting people.”

River's footfalls stall, hearts a flutter at her unknowing husband's words. Surprise and endearment threaten to make her eyes water, and River blinks past the glossy sheen, staring at the one man whose always seen straight through her.

Even now, he must sense her shift in mood, taste it like a palpable thing in the air, because he seeks her out, momentarily forgetting the task at hand as he asks, "Everything alright?"

Her face clears in a moment, affection wiped clean. It's unnerving, even to her, how well she does
that, how quickly she can snap back to reality after drifting into an old memory. "Course," she says with a smile she does her best to hide, biting back words she wouldn’t even begin to know how to form. Swirling her beverage softly around her glass, River watches as the liquid settles and sways, feeling like the past is still alive under her fingertips as she confesses, "It's just... I like archaeology, too."

“Well, archaeology is rubbish. But Lara’s in a class all of her own." He’s speaking to the eggs more so than her, lost in thought. River tampers down a grin, abandoning the DVDs and following her feet as they bring her to a stop in front of his colorful collection of homemade knitting.

Plucking from the pile at random, she discovers an array hideous scarves and lopsided hats, each one more ridiculous than the last. “Is this knitting class of yours free by any chance?”

“No, why do you ask?”

Another brave delve into the pile reveals a particularly unruly and somehow zig-zagging sock, and River nonchalantly answers, “No reason.”

“That reminds me,” the man behind her perks up, and River drops the offending cloth, turning in time to catch him flash a beaming smile. “I have something for you.”

“A gift?” she questions, her interest suddenly piqued.

“If you like.”

“Well, don’t leave a girl in suspense, what is it?”

“Better if I show you. Stir this?” It's more command than question, excitedly thrusting a spatula into her hand as he takes off down the hall, shouting, "Back in a mo'."

River sets her drink aside, taking over his spot at the stove. Shifting the eggs around the pan, she wonders what atrocity he’s picked out for her. She supposes, if it’s hideous, she could always wait a few months, poor juice all over it and blame it on the baby. It wouldn’t be the first time she’s contemplated making target practice out of one of his creations or thrown one of his hats into a black hole. He was hit or miss, her husband. The amount of times he gave her trees rather than flowers or brought her chocolate-covered straws rather than strawberries was atrocious. But he got it right
sometimes. More often than not, he knew how to make her face light up like

“*Merry Christmas, River!*”

River looks up from her textbooks, blinking at the man before her as she impassively corrects, “*Doctor, it’s May.*”

He glances around Luna University’s quad, squinting against the synthetic sunlight and manufactured summer heat. “Well, it’s Christmas in 1792, which is where I’ve just come from, so pop your coat on and let’s go!”

“Maybe next time. I’m studying.” River’s eyes fall back to her book, skim reading a paragraph about Atraxi law when a little black box slides across her page. The Doctor’s pale fingers accompany the intrusion, and River blinks down at it as if it might bite her. “*What’s this?*”

“It’s a gift,” he snatches it away as quickly as he’d presented it to her. “*But you can only have it if you spend the day with me.*”

“Resorting to bribery to have company these days, are you?”

“*Only yours,*” he grins. “*Are you coming or not?*”

She frowns, sucking her bottom lip between her teeth as she contemplates. It’s for show mostly. There’s no where else in the world she’d rather be than that blue box, and if it also happens to accompany a scrawny genius who fancies her, then so be it.

“Give me the present and I’ll tell you how many hours of my time it’s worth.”

“Oh, twenty four hours, easily.” He grins again, and when River’s curious eyes fall back for box, he tucks it in his pocket for safe keeping.

Damn him.
River sits back in her seat, eyes dragging over his form, sizing him up until her scrutiny makes that lithe body squirm. “Two and a half.”

“Eighteen,” he counters. “And I’ll leave the breaks off.”

“Six and I drive the entire time.” River arches a challenging brow, and the Doctor purses his lips, considering.

“Twelve, I let you drive, and you promise not to shoot my hat.”

River’s eyes narrow. “That’s a high price. This had better be a helluva gift.”

The Doctor skips closer, his coattails swaying around his bandy legs. “I happen to have it on the highest authority that you will love this.”

“Is it shiny?”

“Shiny, priceless, and—” he gives a twirl, stopping close enough to tap the end of her nose—“it really brings out your eyes.”

River gets to her feet. He doesn’t back away; he never ever does. River uses the close proximity to her advantage, eyes traversing his sharp features. He’s even more insufferable than usual, a cocky smirk tugging at his lips. He carries himself like a man who’s won the lottery despite never having bought a ticket. River finds the urges to slap him and snog him equally irresistible.


“Deal,” he says reaching into his coat pocket. The small black box returns, and the Doctor holds it out to her as if he’s purchased and packaged her own personal holy grail.

She takes it cautiously, the excitement his presence always brings sparkling in her veins. Green eyes flicker back to his before settling on the prize in her hand. She can’t say for sure what exactly she’s
expecting, but as she pries open the small box, she certainly wasn’t expecting to find a small, silver key.

“You shouldn’t have,” River coos, tone rich with sarcasm.

Dubious green eyes shift back to the man before her, only to find he looks impossibly more smug. The curl in his cheeks is positively impish as he invades her personal space once more, leaning in close to whisper, ”It’s for the TARDIS.”

She can’t say for sure if it’s his words or the way his breath ghosts across the shell of her ear, but something warm and tingly makes her jaw drop and toes curl. River’s hearts stutter and skip and swell and shatter all in the same moment.

The Doctor takes advantage of her stunned silence, as delicious as he is insufferable as he smirks around the words, “What do you think, worth twelve hours of your time, Miss Song?”

River inhales deep as she plucks the key from its resting place. It’s warm as the magma it was formed from, spacetime weaved within cool metal. She holds it tight in her palm for only a moment before tucking it safely between her hearts. “You can have twenty, but no hats.”

He returns to the room with a small carrier bag, feet padding across the floor. River sets aside the spatula, giving her husband her full attention as she watches him rifle through the bag’s contents, eyes downcast. “Now, it’s my first go, mind; and it isn’t the exact colour, but even so, I thought you might like it, and well, anyway, here.”

His ramblings cease as he withdraws a tiny pair of knitted socks from the bag. He holds them out to her, the child's clothing dwarfed by his large palm. They’re blue and gold and the stitching isn’t quite straight; and she doubts they’d do much of anything in ways of keeping an infant's feet warm, but River blinks down at them, dumbfounded and, for once in her life, robbed of any witty retorts.

Her throat is dry and her jaw is slack, watching with glossy eyes as her husband shifts on anxious, bouncing feet. “I told the girls at class about the little bump, and they all insisted on making something.” His tongue snakes out to wet nervous lips, his fretting mouth filling the silence. “Sorry, mine isn’t as good as Evelyn's, but it's the thought that counts?” She still hasn't quite found words and the Doctor swallows, wide-eyed and worried as he begins to pull them away. “On second thought, I'll try again when I'm better, yeah? We should just chuck these in the bin-"
“Don’t you dare!” she snaps. Finally finding her voice as her fingers coil around his forearm, pulling the gift back towards her.

He relaxes, a relieved breathy laugh on his lips as he turns back to face her. His eyes are smiling and his mouth is crooked. There’s a glow about him that could convince a fish to fly just to get a second glance, and there’s no stopping River's hand as it wraps around the back of his neck, pulling him closer. He sways toward her, a flower bending to the will of the breeze. It’s a blur, the way his hazel eyes dilate as they focus on her lips. The sensitive flesh tingles under the weight of his gaze and the next thing River knows, she’s surging forward.

Their mouths meet and he tenses beneath her grip for only a moment before melting against her. His jaw is slack from surprise, her lips slanting over his slightly parted ones, and oh, he’s as sweet as she remembers. Even in this state, he tastes of biscuits and overly-sugared tea. Gentle nails scratch against the back of his neck, and it’s only when his skin pebbles beneath her fingers that she realizes he hasn’t touched her. His hips don’t press against hers. His hands haven’t buried in her hair. Fingers don’t curl around her waist. Instead, they remain frozen at his sides, clutched around clothing for a child he doesn’t know is his. He’s in her grasp and yet out of reach, and the absence of him makes River’s warm blood run cold as she finds the strength to pull away.

“I’m sorry,” she breathes through burning lips, the hand wrapped around his neck making a slow retreat. “I shouldn't have done that.”

She offers no excuses, too caught up in watching every microcosmic emotion that flickers across his face. He’s red as a cherry tomato, his stunned mouth silent. Surprised, hungry eyes flicker up to meet hers before falling back to her lips. There’s a soft thump as the carrier bag hits the floor, forgotten in favor of framing her face. His abrupt grip is firm with intent, his mouth sure and eager as it crashes against her.

Calloused palms burn her cheeks, hot coals against skin that hasn’t felt heat in months. River can’t help the involuntary moan that resonates in the back of her throat. Six months has never felt longer than it has without his touch, and now that she has it again, the feel of him scorches across her skin like wildfire. Fevered and weak and desperate, River’s hands fist around his waistcoat, tugging him closer. He gives a squeak that quickly melts into a groan of approval. If he notices or minds the bump between them, he doesn’t show it. His hands roam across her back and shoulders and into her hair. The smell of burning eggs floats past her senses like a leaf on the wind, unnoticed in the hurricane of her thoughts.

The feel of fingers tangled in her curls makes her body arch without her consent, her palms smoothing over his chest until they settle on the buttons of his waistcoat. His grip on her hair tightens, his teeth grazing over River’s bottom lip. She takes it as encouragement, practiced fingers
plucking the buttons open. One by one they surrender to her will, and she knows he’ll scold her for this later. When he’s him again and they look back on this and laugh, he’ll tut and smirk as he chastises her for misbehaving. Just the memory of that devious twitch in his lips makes River kiss him harder. She relishes the thought of being his bad girl, but the promise of having him back is almost enough to undo her entirely.

Her nails scratch at his chest and he relinquishes his hold on her hair only long enough for River to push the fabric off his shoulders, dropping it like a bad habit. In the back of her mind, it registers that the fabric hits the floor with a louder thud than usual, but she’s a little distracted and who can blame her when her husband’s mouth is on hers after six months of linear solitude. He kisses her with equal vigor, as if he can taste the hunger on her tongue. He drinks from her as if he too has been living in a desert, parched and lonely and desperate for the sweetness of her mouth. Their lips never part, one frantic kiss bleeding into another until panting breathes mingle with soft moans.

She makes for the buttons on his shirt next, and she should stop, really, she should. But his hands find the hem of her shirt, slipping beneath the fabric to stroke across her skin. His palms press against her lower back, guiding her closer. River melts into him gladly, walking him back towards the counter. His shirt falls open and her nails tease at his chest and neck until he shivers. He whimpers into her mouth, a needy, pleading sound, and River's insides coil, hot and cold washing all over. Her thoughts are a haze, a heady rush of teeth and tongues and touch, and she tugs at his shirt, willing it away so she can make ruinous scratches over the rest of his pale skin.

He releases her again, groaning as he attempts to rid himself of his shirt. His arms jerk at his sides, trying to shake the fabric free. River realizes too late that his cuffs were never undone and his flustered, flailing limbs swing wide as he trips over his own feet, stumbling backward.

The handle of the frying pan takes the brunt of the assault, sending it careening into the air and scattering now burnt eggs across the kitchen floor. The pan clatters against tile, an alarm bell between them that bids them to spring apart like children caught with their hands in the cookie jar. They stand, still as statues save for their heaving chests. His hair is a mess, face flushed and shirt undone. He looks like wreckage, nail marks on his chest the signature she always leaves when their eager bodies meet. River stares at the sight of him before her, the core of her in knots even as a laugh threatens to breach her panting lips.

His eyes break away first, his hands trembling as his gaze falls to the scrambled mess strewn across the ground. His shirt is still trapped around his wrists even as it hangs off his shoulders. He fights with his own clothing like a man possessed as he struggles to turn off the stove, eyes cast downward as he rushes from the room, muttering something about a broom.

He’s gone before she can stop him, not that she’d know what to say if she did. Lust still ravages her veins, but common sense is fighting its way to the surface. She can’t do this, not when he’s not hers, not really. The reason she came here tonight stabs like a knife between her fluttering hearts. River
straightens her clothing even as her tongue snakes across her lips, tasting the remnants of his kiss.

She shifts where she stands, anxious eyes glancing around the room, and that’s when she sees it, something round and metal poking halfway out of his vest pocket. River squats down, throat suddenly tight as her fingers wrap around ancient metal. It's warm from the heat of his body and Rivers pulls it from its hiding place, turning it over in her hand.

The air in her lungs freezes, oxygen replaced by terror, hearts replaced with bombs beating erratically inside her chest, because the markings are different, absent of swirling Gallifreyan. The object she holds doesn’t whisper against her mind or sing at her touch. It doesn’t radiate light or energy. Her husband’s essence isn’t nestled inside like a pearl trapped in the iron jaws of an oyster.

She’s still staring at the object in dumbfounded disbelief when the man who wears her husband’s face reenters the room. River is faintly aware of the sound his feet make as they thump against the floor, the cadence of it luring her gaze like a siren. He’s positively disheveled, a flurry of limbs armed with a broom and dustpan, his hastily redone shirt buttons mismatched and askew. His floppy quiff has been ruined by her fingers, his reddened lips spilling apologies as gracelessly as he blusters back into the kitchen.

River doesn’t hear them, too numb, too far away, ears too full of white noise to focus on anything except, “Is this the only pocket watch you have?"

"Hm?" He glances up, caught off guard by the question, but glad for the distraction from the thick air between them. "I believe so, yes."

"Nothing else?” River presses, a tremor to her voice she does her best to disguise. “No little trinkets, I dunno, tucked in a drawer somewhere?"

"Nothing comes to mind,” he answers, hastily sweeping up the mess on the floor. “Why, are you looking for one?"

River releases a shaky exhale. Just her breath is enough to put her whole universe off kilter. The whole world is falling apart, the gravity beneath her feet turned upside down as she calmly answers, “As a matter of fact, I am.”
As if summoned, River's phone buzzes, and Jack's brow arches knowingly at the sound. "It hasn't even been twelve hours. He always this clingy?"

"Worse," River sighs, a wistful nostalgia creeping into her tone. "You should see him when I rile up the Sontarans."

Jack barks out a laugh, "The Oncoming Storm is co-dependent. Who knew?"

"There is only one kind of shock worse than the totally unexpected: the expected for which one has refused to prepare." - Mary Renault

The faucet thunders into the porcelain tub, the sound of it made louder as it echoes off the bathroom’s tile floors. Warm water slips over River’s skin like silk, steam drifting up through the bubbles. Her husband is behind her, his gangly limbs wrapped around her. River wiggles back against him, just because she can. She’s always loved the feel of his bare skin against her back, especially when the rest of him is just as naked. River inhales deep, lavender oils delighting her senses, and thinks that there’s nowhere else in the universe she’d rather be than their little Oasis for two.

Or should she say, three.

River’s palm falls to her stomach in what’s becoming a rather disgustingly domestic habit. The skin there is still flat and tight, and it’s rather hard to believe that there’s a whole universe inside her. A new life with endless potential and possibility is just beginning beneath the palm of her hand.

River lifts one of her feet from the embrace of the water, a manicured toe shutting off the tap. The room falls quiet, and behind her, the Doctor shifts, taking his cue to fill their champagne flutes. Not with champagne, of course. Being the ridiculous man that he is, he brought sparkling grape juice instead, claiming that ‘a bubble bath was no bath at all without a bit of fizz.’
He passes her the glass, and River takes it with her free hand, bringing the sweet liquid to her lips. Bubbles burst across her tongue, and River swallows, delighting in the way it tingles all the way down.

“I almost asked you about it once, you know,” she says softly, a secret for the man at her back and the bubbles clinging to her skin.

He reads her moods like a sailor can the sky, his lips a compass pointing her to safety, to home, as he presses a kiss to the back of her neck. “Asked me about what?”

“Children,” she hums, and it’s so much easier this time around, to tell him the truth. “We were on Asgard, the time with the Valkyries. There was a lost little boy. You made him smile, and I thought, well, you’d make an amazing father.”

“Why didn’t you?” His free hand makes soothing strokes up and down her bicep, and River turns toward it, brushing her lips against his fingers when they get to the top of her shoulder.

“I wasn’t sure you wanted them,” she whispers into his knuckles.

“All the more reason to ask.” His hand doesn’t move, lingering there like it relishes the ghost of her soft kisses.

When a stillness that threatens to choke her fills the air, River exhales deep, ridding her lungs of it. She refuses to swallow down the lump in her throat. She refuses to hide from him, not anymore.

“I was scared of your answer,” she clarifies. “I didn’t want to do it alone, and even if you did want kids, why would you have them with someone like me? Psychopath, thief, ex-con,” she snorts. “I’m not exactly a role model.”

He does move then, setting aside his beverage to wrap his arms around her chest. He’s bony and lithe and sharp in all the right places, but there’s nothing softer and sweeter than his embrace. His arms are a shelter and his nose nuzzles into the crook of her neck. There was a time the small gesture of affection would have been enough, when she would have made do with silence and half formed confessions. But now-a-days, she expects a little more. She waits, for once, never wondering if her patience is in vain.
“I swore I’d never have children,” he breathes against her shoulder blade, and River stills, drinking in his words like gospel. “After the Time War, I couldn’t think of anything worse than having something I knew I would lose.” The water sloshes, filling the silence and River places a gentle hand on the arms he’s folded around her, waiting with baited breath as he finishes, “And then I met you. I met you and the worst thing imaginable happened. I lost you before I ever even had you.”

Her grip on his arm tightens, reminding him that she’s here. In return, he plants a kiss to her shoulder, a promise that he knows.

“I fell in love with you anyway, and not because you were mysterious or dangerous or because I had to or any of those other silly things you claim to believe.” One of his hands shifts, sliding across her collar bone and coming to a stop in the valley between her breasts. “I fell for you because of your hearts, because you always cared, about everyone. You loved without condition. You’re stubborn and selfless and fiercely protective. And you, River Song,” -his kisses continue, peppering along her neck and jaw and cheek and ear,- “Professor of archaeology, skilled detective, renowned explorer, and patron saint of kicking my arse, will be a brilliant mother.”

She turns toward him, their temples touching, foreheads leaning against one another. River lifts a damp hand up to card through his messy locks, her nails scratching at his temple. When she speaks, her voice is soft, warmed by his words and the press of his skin even as she argues, “You don’t know that.”

“Sure I do. You’ve conquered everything life has thrown at you. Even death, yours and mine. You’ve looked impossible in the eye and laughed. You make miracles out of absolute madness.” He gives a giggle then, his hand sliding down her chest and ribs to rest over her stomach. “And I can’t wait to see what magic you make of this.”

Her hand joins his over her stomach, their fingers lacing. But she can’t shake the feeling that this is one adventure she can’t do alone. She’ll need his help. Having a family is one ship he might actually drive better than her. That is, if he can manage to sit still for that long. “Children require routine,” she recites, a warning or a reminder or a test. “I imagine that could get pretty boring after a while.”

“Nothing involving you is ever boring,” he counters, and River bites her bottom lip to keep it from trembling.

“You’ll be here, though, won’t you? Even for the Sunday’s and the Tuesday afternoons?”
*He pulls her ever tighter, so close she can feel his double heartbeat, steady and sure, as he promises, “I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”*

On the other end of the phone line, Owen makes a noise of displeasure. River smirks, trying to keep the amusement out of her voice as she reminds, “Make sure you check every bin, especially the ones behind the take away.”

“Why couldn’t I just search her flat?” he complains, and River leans leisurely back in her desk chair, huffing.

“Because Gwen’s already done it. Went over it with a fine tooth comb. There’s nothing. The suspect cleaned the place out.”

“No one goes totally off the grid. She must be somewhere.”

Or *somewhen*, River thinks to herself. The rules are always different when time travel is involved, like playing chess on three boards at once, one has to be prepared for anything. They’ve done what they can, but finding someone who knows they’re being looked for is harder than hunting a rabbit that's already changed holes. Set traps all you like, but chances are, all you'll catch are ghosts.
Maddie will be laying low now, River’s almost certain of it. She prefers it that way, if she’s honest. Chucking the wild cards always makes it easier to chase an ace.

“Let Gwen and Ianto worry about the suspect. You do your level best to find that watch, that’s our top priority.”

The sounds of traffic float over the phone line. It’s busy, even this early. A clear sign it must be a nice day out, not that River would know. Her office yields only artificial light, the dreary brick walls the only sight to occupy her eyes. River’s gaze drifts absentmindedly along the exposed mortar and red stone before catching on the newest addition to her desk. The magic eight ball he gave her the first time she entered his shop is perched in the corner, the glorified paperweight sitting atop a throne of folders. It feels like ages since he entrusted it in her care, when he tossed it into her hands, a grin cracking those sharp cheeks of his.

River scoops up the object, hand smoothing over cool plastic and giving it a shake as the man on the other end of the line grumbles, “But if she *is* gone yeah, why are we even still looking for the watch?”
“Because I said so,” River quips, trying not to take it as a sign when the child’s toy reads *outlook not good*. “There’s still a chance it wasn’t her, however slim. He may have dropped it or sold it or given the damn thing away, knowing him.”

"Can't you just tell him how important it is? Maybe he’ll look harder.” Owen’s irritable voice hums down the phone line and River sets the sassy toy aside, putting thoughts of her husband and his gifts to the back of her mind.

“Yes, by all means, ask the adrenaline junkie if he’s seen a watch of infinite value and unparalleled danger. No chance he’ll be tempted to open it and unleash a world of hellfire on the entire universe.”

“A simple no would suffice.” Owen grunts, the sound of metal clanging open reverberating in the background. He must plug his nose because he sounds extra nasally as he begrudgingly states, "Still don’t see why do I have to be the one dumpster diving.”

"Easy. I don’t fancy you." She hears him scoff but leaves no time for smart remarks, a smug inflection in her tone as she instructs, "Be back by nine, and do bring dinner for the rest of the team.”

River ends the call before he can protest further, a satisfied smile creeping up her cheeks. She’s just setting down the phone when Jack saunters into the room she’s claimed as her own. And what a sight for sore eyes he is, because her friend comes barring a warm cup of tea.

"Oh, bless you, Harkness,” she coos, reaching for the steaming cup.

Jack passes it to her, his searching eyes roaming over her form, lingering on the bags no doubt haunting her eyes. "You look like shit."

The gun strapped to River's thigh is suddenly quite appealing, but she levels him with a glare instead, rolling her eyes as she mutters, "As charming as ever, I see."

"Late night?” he asks, taking the liberty of sitting on the corner of her desk.

"Early morning, more like. I didn’t leave his shop till nearly half-four.”
Jack about chokes on scalding liquid, and River takes a small amount of pleasure in watching him cough and splutter. "Did you..?"

"Get the watch?" she finishes before he can derail the conversation. "No, I didn't."

"But did you.." Jack grins, eyebrows waggling, "you know."

"No," River rolls her eyes, and the defense sounds like a weak one even to her as she continues, "He hardly knows me."

"He let you in, though," Jack counters, and River gives a half-hearted shrug.

"He was bound to, residual memory can't be helped. It's why he wanted me to stay away, so emotions wouldn't muck this up and make this harder." And it couldn't get much muckier, could it? With a missing watch and a murderer on hiatus and a smitten husband whose only proven himself to be more of a damsel than usual.

As if summoned, River's phone buzzes, and Jack's brow arches knowingly at the sound. "It hasn't even been twelve hours. He always this clingy?"

"Worse," River sighs, a wistful nostalgia creeping into her tone. "You should see him when I rile up the Sontarans."

Jack barks out a laugh, "The Oncoming Storm is co-dependent. Who knew?"

A pleased hum reverberates in the back of River’s throat as she turns back to her computer, running diagnostics on any new rift activity. Jack watches over her shoulder, taking another sip of his tea. River's phone buzzes again, but when she says nothing, Jack follows her lead, pointedly ignoring it.

Her friend scoops up the eight ball, turning it over in his hands and studying it curiously. "What's lover boy want now, anyway?"

"He wants to take me to the museum,” River answers easily, and Jack arches a dubious brow.
"How... not exciting."

River tosses him a scolding glance. It won't be as fun as usual, when they can keep score and bicker about which exhibits she can and can't steal, but even so, "Time with the Doctor is never dull."

River snatches the eight ball from his grasp, setting the toy back on her desk. Jack chuckles again, affection in his voice as he speaks over the rim of his mug. "You're getting soft, Song."

And she really, really is. She blames the hormones entirely. Before she was carrying her precious little parasite, she never would have succumbed to such temptation. She had decades of experience dancing around Doctors who didn’t know her. She knew when to follow him and when to fold. But it’s harder to say no to his affections now, when tangled timelines aren’t tugging her in one direction or another. It’s harder to know which path is the right one when her safety line is the one pulling her under. She’s no stranger to missing her husband, but now more than ever, she finds herself choking on the absence of him. She’s lonely though she isn’t alone at all, and maybe that’s why the sight of handmade booties reduced her to near speechlessness. Maybe that’s why the hope in his eyes made her feet unable to move towards the door.

She can still taste him on her mouth, still smell the burning eggs and feel the flutter of her hearts as his palms framed her cheeks. The moment was perfect and poignant and her insides are so fit to bursting from the joy of it that the confession bubbles up like vomit as she says, "We kissed."

There’s silence for a moment, only her hearts pounding out a guilty tune and the hum of the computer monitor. Jack breaks the stillness, his laughter like a gunshot as he blurts out, “Finally!”

River buries the scolding knowledge that she should be keeping her distance, that it’s not right or fair when he hardly knows her at all. But Jack’s grin is so wide and contagious, River can’t help but allow herself the small indulgence as she bites her bottom lip. “In the kitchen. We nearly broke a frying pan.”

“Kinky,” Jack quips. “Not exactly what I was expecting, but who am I to judge.”

River swats at him even as she does her best to tame a smile. “He was cooking and we knocked it on the floor.”

“Animals, the both of you,” Jack grins. “Who made the first move?”
“Me, technically,” she concedes, then amends, “But he made the second! And he gave me a gift. How was I supposed to react?”

“What did he give you?”


“Go back for more.” His eyebrows waggle encouragingly, and River's teeth sink further into her lip.

“I can’t. It’s weird.” Her gaze cuts to him from the corner of her eye, seeking confirmation. “Isn’t it?”

Beside her, Jack shrugs, the grin on his lips replaced by that knowing look she hates so much. “Only if you keep lying. If you tell him...”

“I can’t,” River snaps. “Why does everyone keep harping on about that when it’s the one thing I can’t do? You think I don’t want to tell him? You know as well as I do that temptation will always get the better of him. He can’t know who I am or what he is. It would compromise everything.”

She isn’t sure who she’s reminding, the speech a mantra she’s said to herself many nights as she willed herself to sleep. She repeats it the same way she replays the sound of his voice, reliving some of his last words to her because the thought of him has always been enough to remind her to be brave.

"Promise me," he pleas, squeezing her hands to his like a lifeline. "Promise me you'll keep our baby safe. Promise me you'll stay away.”

Jack says nothing, holding his tongue either because he knows she’s right or because he’s learned not to press her. When the wave of silence becomes too much, River clears her throat of the guilt that seems to settle like dust on the back of her tongue. She shouldn’t have kissed him, shouldn’t have let it get that far, and she thanks his clumsy limbs for stopping them when she wasn’t strong enough to pull away. She can’t help but think of the Serenity Pools, of how delicious it felt to be pressed against his bare chest and surrounded by the life force of the universe. She remembers how he pulled away despite his racing hearts and dark eyes. She recalls his panting breaths as he told her it wasn't right. She understands now, the strength that must have taken, how his hearts must have twisted when she turned her back on him. Their positions are reversed now, and though the unread messages on
River's phone suddenly feel like a salve, she can't help but notice that she's still the one running away.

The sound of Jack’s mobile shakes River from her reverie, watching as her friend frowns down at his screen. “It’s Tosh.”

Which is odd, that she’d phone when she’s only a flight of stairs away. But stranger things have happened within these walls, so River thinks nothing of it, giving her friend her enrapt attention as he answers the call. Jack listens for a moment, confusion making itself ever more present on his brow.

“Does she have the results?” River asks, curiosity summoning her from her seat and luring her to her friend's side. Jack nods his head yes, still rather perplexed, and River inches closer, straining to hear. “Well? What did she find out? Did we get an ID?”

Jack waves River away from his personal space, somewhat irritated as he says, “Just spit it out, Tosh.” River frowns down at him, and Jack pulls the phone away from his mouth to whisper, “She wants to make sure you’re sitting down.”

“Oh bloody hell,” River scoffs, rolling her eyes as she begins marching downstairs to confront the girl herself.

Impatient feet stomp against metal stairs, and Tosh spins around, eyes widening when she sees a pregnant ball of fury stalking toward her. River feels Jack on the steps behind her before she watches Tosh reluctantly put down the phone. The poor girl has clearly been up all night, still in the same clothes River left her in, face paler and eyes strained. Unfortunately, her own lack of sleep has left little room for sympathy. River arches a no-nonsense eyebrow as she comes to a stop in front of the woman's desk. Tosh flicks worried, slightly pleading eyes to Jack, stiffening like she wants to hedge away as she mumbles under her breath. “Does she have her gun on her?”

"Always," River cuts in, demanding the girl’s attention. "Don't make me use it. Now, what have you found out?"

Tosh gulps, nervous eyes shifting to look anywhere but River as she babbles, “No ID. I don’t think it’s even possible, given the situation. But her genome signatures are quite remarkable, unparalleled, even. The system has never seen anything like it and that’s why I wasn’t sure, but between the radiation and helix symmetry in the data outputs-"
“In English, Toshiko.” River snaps, patience wearing thin.

“No matches yet,” she finishes quickly, the words a rush, a calm before the storm. “But there’s one thing I can confirm.”

“And? Out with it.”

“It’s better if you see for yourself,” she says hesitantly, passing a print out to River.

River snatches it up, eyes scanning the page, and oh. No, no, no, absolutely not. This is worse than bad. This is impossible. There’s no way, “She’s a Time Lord?” River hisses out. “That’s not possible. There must be some mistake.”

Jack slides the paper from her, looking it over as River takes it upon herself to examine Tosh’s equipment, hoping to find an error. The other woman hovers nervously at River’s side, hands ringing together as she justifies, “I ran it three times. Triple-helix strand. Laced with artron energy. She’s a Time Lord. No doubt about it.”

“But it can’t be!” River argues, as desperate as she is adamant. “The prophecy said they’d come back after the baby was born. Not before. That’s why we did all this. That’s why we’re hiding!”

“River,” Jack starts hesitantly. “If they found you anyway…”

River silences him by slamming her hand on the desk, the echo of her outburst ringing off stone walls. “Then why haven’t they taken us in? Why the song and dance?”

“Maybe it’s some kind of law? Maybe they can’t touch him while he’s human?”

“Or maybe they’re waiting for something else,” Tosh says quietly, a whisper in a hurricane that nearly makes River buckle at the knees.

Her hand falls to her stomach instead, keeping her son safe from the weight of all her fears crashing down on them both. "But they couldn't have tracked us through the Doctor, so how do they know we're here? How did they get here?"
“Maybe it’s just her,” Jack supplies, his tone even enough for the both of them. “Maybe that’s what the energy shifts are. Maybe she’s trying to tell the others, trying to get them through?”

River takes a deep breath in through her nose, trying her best to see the shore through the fog. It would certainly be easier to send a single foot soldier than an entire army, “But that still doesn’t explain the murders. They’re a sadistic lot, but that isn’t their style. And her weapon, it isn’t nearly horrific enough to be of Time Lord creation.”

"Maybe she’s got allies?" Jack theorizes, and there he goes again, putting voice to her worst nightmares. The Sisterhood has warned them of this too, that it wouldn’t just be the Time Lords who sought to make use of the child inside her. “If they know you’re here too, you’re in just as much danger as the Doctor is. You have to tell him.”

“And risk him opening it?” River scoffs. “Or worse, destroying it? That’s not a risk I’m willing to take.”

River shakes her head in stubborn denial and Jack squares his broad shoulders. “What’s the alternative? Kill her? We can’t even find her.”

“She’ll turn up,” River offers, calm and collected even as her insides churn. Despite the sea of uncertainty in which she swims, there’s one thing she knows with absolutely clarity. She’ll burn the Time Lords and everything they’ve ever touched before she lets them get their hands on her child. “And when she does, we’ll be ready.”

The shift in her demeanor makes Jack wary, eyes narrowing like he knows, like he’s caught wind of the plan already brewing in her mind. “What are you thinking?”

“In my experience,” River sighs, heavy air expelled from her lungs. “There’s only one thing that can kill a Time Lord stone dead.”

“What’s that?” Tosh asks, and River breaks her green eyes from Jack’s knowing ones.

Her gaze settles on the woman beside her, a chill settling around the room as River breathes, “Me.”
She goes under the cover of night. If she’s going to do this, take on another Time Lord, there’s one thing she’s going to need. An echo of her past she keeps locked away is waiting for her in the only place she trusts.

The TARDIS.

The moon is high and the streets are bare, an hour so late even him in doors is bound to be asleep. He’ll be resting up to take her to the museum, she expects. A date she agreed to despite her better judgement, but it isn’t hurting anything, not really. As long as he's with her, she can keep him out of trouble, at least. It’s hardly a new prospect, having adventures with Doctor's she's not supposed to. She wonders what he'll say to her when he finally comes back, if he'll kiss her or scold her first. River smirks to herself, wondering which one she'll enjoy more.

Sneaking around in the TARDIS without his knowledge isn't new either. It's practically a hobby at this point. She figures, he more or less forfeit his consent when he gave her her own key anyway. Even now, the item in question sits safely between her hearts, and as River approaches the familiar shop, she reaches for the priceless metal without question. There’s no hesitation in her movements as she slips the key into the lock on the door and turns.

Or tries to at least.

The key doesn’t budge and River frowns, giving it another encouraging jiggle. The door rattles with her efforts and, faintly, in the back of her mind, she feels the TARDIS hum.

“What's the matter with you?” River fusses, hand stroking along the frame soothingly. “It’s me.”

The ship hums again in response, a warm embrace kissing at River’s mind. She smiles at the familiar greeting, but the tender curl of her lips falls away the moment she tries the key again. It still won’t budge, and when River huffs, the ship groans back at her in defiance.

“You’re not still cross about redecorating, are you?” River folds her arms over her chest, hip jutting out as she argues with a door frame. “I told you it was only temporary. Only a few more months now
and you’ll be back to your old self.”

The TARDIS groans again, a mournful little melody, and River rolls her eyes. Honestly, the Old Girl was even more dramatic than her husband sometimes.

“Come on now, don’t be grumpy with me,” she coos, pressing her palm to the wood. It’s only a footprint of the sentience she would normally feel, a tingle against her skin where usually music would swallow her whole. It’s a sad tune, restless and worried as any mother would be when the ones she cares for are beyond her protective reach. “I know,” River breathes, opening up her thoughts and hearts to the ship she calls mother. A world of secrets fill the silence between them, and River can’t help but wonder what the TARDIS sees in her. Fear, probably, buried beneath layers of bravado. River shuts her eyes and lets the TARDIS see her for what she is, a little girl that’s still afraid of prophecies and things she can’t control, as a woman still running, from loneliness and towards the one thing she was born to do- save the universe.

A soft click disturbs the silence of the night air, and when River opens her eyes, she sees the key has turned of its own volition. “Thank you,” she whispers, pressing her forehead to the door and breathing deep before she twists the handle and steps inside.

One weight lifts from her mind only for another to take its place as she steps over the threshold. The room is dark and cluttered, but the TARDIS guides her as she always has, past obstacles and sharp objects that threaten her path. River makes her way toward the back of the shop, to the secret cupboard where the console room is waiting. It takes a minute or so, but her eyes adjust to the darkness as she winds past book shelves and tables loaded with trinkets. She slips deeper into the ship, and the closer she gets to her destination, the more time tugs at her. It sparks in the blood in her veins, in the marrow of her bones and the very fabric of her being. She can almost taste the remnants of vortex that thrive in the heart of this ship. It feels right. it feels like home, like everything she's been forced to live without for the sake of keeping their child mortal.

"Promise me you'll stay away," haunts her thoughts like a specter, making every step she takes feel as much like a broken promise as it does a home coming. When she reaches the closet in question, River shakes away her husband's request, pushing aside coats and jumpers and clothing of all kinds until, there. At the back of the wardrobe a soft gold light creeps from beneath a crack near the floor. It’s as tempting as any forbidden fruit, and guilt dances hand in hand with desire as River gives into the gravity of all of time and space.

She tries not to think about the fact that forbidden things always taste sweeter when she plunders them with the Doctor, or that the very man she’s deceiving is asleep upstairs. She tells herself it isn't betrayal, not really. It isn't like she's going for a joy ride. She's here for a reason. She's protecting their son like she promised she would. Besides, what the Doctor doesn’t know won’t hurt him, and with danger at her heels and hope just beyond her grasp, River lets herself be led to secret entrance to the console room. When she reaches out and her fingers wrap around a handle, she turns it and...
pushes the door open without remorse. And oh, it’s as beautiful and blinding as it was the day she first saw it, as spectacular as it is every time she sets foot inside. The sentence is stronger here, in the console room, and River takes a moment to close her eyes, basking in the stillness, in the one place where time has never been able to touch her or tear them apart.

Something like sympathy caresses her thoughts, and at her mother's reminder that it can’t last forever, she steps fully into the room, closing the door behind her. Her steps echo as they make their way across the metal floor. It's a cadence she knows all too well, and she wishes more than anything that it would be followed by the twisting of levers and wheeze of the engines as she took flight into the stars beyond. For now, River makes do with stroking her fingers over the console as she passes, feeling the warm metal against her palm as she makes for the round cupboards on the walls of the ship.

She’s here for a purpose, and she puts her sentimental thoughts in a box at the back of her mind, focusing on the task at hand. The wall before her is covered in hidden cabinets, and River stares up at the round compartments, trying to recall in which one the item she seeks is hiding. It's been over a century since she had a use for it, and the Old Girl's been redecorated so many times, it could be anywhere by now. With a resigned sigh, River begins her search, opening them at random. The first cabinet she reaches for reveals a few spare explosives, a stack of fake IDs, and a card with enough credits to buy the Eastern quadrant of the Messier galaxy. River closes it, moving onto the next only to find it equally unhelpful. It's stocked mostly with biscuits and tea that is quite liberal with the term *herbal*, but delicious all the same. A third attempt showcases The Lost Gem of the Nine Aisles and a necklace she stole off the neck of a planetary dictator's wife. River smirks at the memory. Now that was a party. The fourth cabinet finds her brandy, and River sighs, staring at it longingly for only a moment before closing it and moving onto the next. She’d never keep it in there. The idiot might accidentally drink some. No, she’d have put it somewhere he’d never dare look. Moving on to her fifth cabinet, River swings open the round door to find-

“Ah, there they are, the instruction manuals.” Brightening, River digs behind them, fingers groping around the back of the cabinet until they wrap around a vile of silver, mercury-like liquid. She withdraws her hand, satisfied as she blows the dust from the glass. The poison on the Judas tree shimmers in the glow of the TARDIS lights, glittering like stars on a placid sea. It's as deadly as it is captivating, and with a shiver, River tucks the vile into her pocket for safe keeping.

"Hello, wife." Her husband's chipper voice rings in the air like a bell, and River whips around, hearts in her throat.

What she finds is a mirage, a flickering apparition of the man she married. A hologram of her husband stands by the console, slightly transparent and glitching like static as he attempts to get the frequency right. Despite the fact that he isn't real, the spike of adrenaline and excitement in her veins doesn't dim. How could it when her husband is smiling back at her? His grin is wide and mischievous as he lifts a scolding finger, waggling it as he says, "You promised you wouldn't come in here, you naughty minx. But I knew you would, so I left you this video. How long did you make it, eh? Two months? Three? Are you showing yet? I’ll bet you look magnificent."
Pure, unadulterated joy hums down into her bones, and River's face lights up, smiling so wide she fears her cheeks may crack. She doesn't have it in her to care, though. The universe itself could be shattering and not even that could tear her attentions from her husband's sparkling eyes.

"Now, onto the important bits. Don't let anyone give me pears or yogurt. And make sure I have a fez. Fezzes are cool." He does a little twirl, putting on a show for her even as he prattles on with instructions he knows she'll never heed. "Don't let me join any football teams, either. At some point I'm sure I'll try, but honestly, don't let me. I'm far too good and someone's bound to notice."

She laughs at that, hearts so light they may just float out of her chest, gravity be damned. His hair is a mess and his bow tie is crooked and god, she'd forgotten how much she missed him until this moment. The man she's with now is more than enough to sustain her. But after being reminded of the real him, it's like remembering how sunlight feels on your face after a long winter. It's like seeing colors after living in black and white, and River drinks in the sight of him, memorizing all the details she already knows so well. He continues to ramble about nothing and everything and that time she let him enter a baking contest, and I would have won too if I hadn't mixed up the salt and sugar. River gravitates to him, toward the cadence of his voice and the movements that are so uniquely him. She swears even the echo of him radiates warmth. Or maybe that's just her insides, filled to bursting with sunshine simply because he's here and he's hers and he hasn't looked at her like that in months.

"To sum up, keep me away from sleds and skateboards and anything else that moves of its own accord." He lets out an accomplished exhale, her eyes still drunk on the sight of that twitchy, gangly frame.

And maybe that's why she feels it so acutely, the moment his body language changes. Her skin prickles as dread ripples through her like a gust of wind in a drafty room.

"Oh, and one more thing," he adds, his voice adopting a more serious tone. There’s a heavy pause as he averts his eyes, working his jaw like he’s wrestling with words he doesn’t want to say. River’s never been one to be afraid of heights, but his eyes suddenly feel like caverns, like bottomless pits. It feels like standing on a precipice, and the hairs on River's neck stand on end, breath stilling in her chest. "The watch," he holds up an object, the one she found in his vest pocket. His eyes shift away from the screen, guilt hidden among the hazel as he explains, "It's a fake. I've wired the real one into the TARDIS. Even I don't know what she'll do with it afterwards, but she'll keep it safe; I know she will."

River takes another step forward, hesitant this time. She reads his body language like an ancient rune. She knows the signs that point to a bountiful summer and those that hint at the end of days. Her husband looks like a storm cloud now, distant and dark and ready to rain down destruction where once there was hope.
His eyes shut tight, keeping back the emotions they'd learned to show as he forces out the words, "I won't be changing back."

It hits her like a hurricane, his soft confession a rush of wind that deafens her. Terror swells inside her like a wave ready to break, washing over her muscles and bones and organs until the very core of her goes cold.

"I'm sorry I deceived you. I know we promised we never would again, that we didn't need to. But I made a choice. And you can hate me if you need to, that's..." he stutters, the very thought of it enough to cause him physical pain. "That's fine, because I didn't do it for you. I did it for our baby, to keep him safe."

The hologram of her husband flickers, disappearing for half a moment, and River's breath catches, terrified that he's gone. It's only when the mirage returns, when she sees him cast his hazel eyes downward that she realizes she lost him a long time ago. He already said his goodbye and she never even knew. River blinks against the numbness coating her like an anesthetic. Something wet and warm slides down her cheek, and some distant part of her, the bit that keeps her hearts beating and lungs inflating registers that she's crying.

"It's the only way, River. You said it yourself, he needs boring. He needs routine, not running." And it burns, hearing her own words thrown back in her face as justification for leaving her behind. "If I came back, someone would always be looking for me, for us. We both know I'm a magnet for trouble. We'd never stop running. He'd never be safe, not really. And one day, maybe not right away, but eventually, someone would find us. And then what? If something happened to our child... if someone tried to use him the way they did you..." his voice trails off, too angry, too horrified, too devastated to continue. "I won't be responsible for that."

He declares it like a promise, a vow, a proclamation set in stone. He is steady and sure, and here she stands, the world spinning around her until she feels dizzy. He is resolute while she wavers on limbs that threaten to shake.

"Someone has to protect our child," he continues. "And it has to be you. You've always been far better at saving people than I have." He laughs, and its light and broken and strong even when he wants to shatter. His good intentions and self-sacrificing nature everything she loves and hates about him most. "If there's only one thing I ever get to give him, let it be this. Let me keep you both safe. After he's born, the two of you go far away from here. Settle down somewhere safe and quiet. Give him all the things I never could." His eyes are ancient and begging, chipping away at everything inside her that makes her strong. "And a life without me, well, what does our son need me for when he's got you, eh?"
She wants to scream that she needs him. She needs him here when their son is born. She'll need him when their child cries and smiles. She needs him to hear the first laugh and see his first steps and bandage his skinned knees. She wants to shout until her lungs bleed that she needs him, always, but it means nothing when the only ears close enough to hear belong to an imposter who wouldn’t understand anyway.

"And wife," he continues, an old familiar guilt in his eyes as he says, "If you'll allow me to be selfish one last time, please don't ever tell me the truth. I couldn't bear it, River." He's weaker now, pleading with her to understand. But she can't. She refuses. "Stay away, because I couldn't bear meeting you and not keeping you."

Her feet have carried her forward. In protest or desperation, she isn't sure. It's hard to feel anything when her world is crumbling around her. He may as well be asking a bird not to fly, to live without doing that which it was meant to, because leaving him is the one impossible thing she simply can't do. The mirage before her is the last remnant of everything she knows is real, and here he stands, flickering and fading before her like a dream she's struggling to remember. And it does feel like a dream, like the night terrors that used to haunt her childhood. Her vision blurs around the edges, and a voice inside her screams at her to breathe.

"This is the only way," he says again, and she isn't sure which one of them he's trying to convince.

"Sweetie?" she hears her own voice call, an echo from the past, of herself when she still held tight to that dangerous, desperate thing called hope. The specter before her turns, summoned by the sound of her voice.

"Coming, dear," he answers back, a levity to his voice that shouldn't be possible, not after what he's just said, what he's about to do. When he turns to face her again, he looks haunted, hazel eyes heavy in a way she hasn't seen since before the Library. "Take care of our child," he whispers, his hand lifting as if he could reach through the video, through the past and the future and every law of physics just to stroke her face once more. "I love you," he says, voice cracking despite the devotion weaved within. "Always and completely."

The hologram disappears, gone as if it was never there at all. A gasp bursts from River's lips, the air sucked from her lungs, a life-force ripped away with his vanishing form. The safety she once felt in this room is tainted now, replaced by something cold and hollow. She's no more alone than she was a moment or a month ago, and yet she feels as if everything has been stolen from her. The promise of her husband back, of having the family she never dared let herself want, it's all gone, lost, scattered to the wind like everything else that she's ever loved.

Hot tears born of anger carve paths down her face, and with them, comes defiance. "No," she declares, a frustrated hand wiping at her eyes. "He doesn't get to make this decision," she says to the
empty room, to her husband's words that still linger in the air, to the TARDIS herself. "After everything we've been through, he doesn't just get to-

Leave me, lodges in the back of her throat, because he promised. He promised he'd be here. She can't do this alone.

“Enough of this foolishness,” she huffs, pushing down the emotions that threaten to consume her as she fixes determined eyes on the console. “Let’s have it then. Give me the watch.”

The ship does nothing, no twisting nobs or shifting compartments. She doesn’t even hum, silent and stubborn in the face of River’s demands. River chokes on the silence, feeling like a petulant child as rage swells in her chest.

“You can’t be serious,” she hisses, the fringes of a tantrum scratching and clawing its way up her throat. “Give me the watch!” She tries again, and when her shouts yield no results, River feels as if she might break. Stoney resolve withers into fragile glass as the dam of anger holding back her tears begins to crumble, helplessness casting a shadow over her last glimmer of hope. The red behind River’s eyes softens to a blur of glossy tears, voice cracking over feeble demands as she whispers, “Please.”

The ship she calls mother doesn’t yield, her soft hums as sympathetic as they are stern. The lights dim and with them music that sounds like safe and destiny and sorry pulse inside her mind. Not human words, of course. The TARDIS has always been more than that, always sung to River in a different key than she did others. A melody Crests over her now, more mournful a tune than she sang after Manhattan. Where once a song would bring her comfort, now River only feels betrayal filling the space between her hearts where she once kept sodality, because, for once, the TARDIS has sided with him.

Her eyes sting and her head feels light, her blanket of blind hope ripped from beneath her feet. She feels as if she may collapse, but there’s no fun in falling anymore, only fear, because the man that catch her is asking her to stay away. His final words, always and completely toll like a funeral bell, like bitter goodbye. His tone was rich with love and still somehow hollow, as if forgiveness isn’t something he dares ask for, not this time.

River has half a mind not to give it.

The last words he said to her before he changed were a promise to return. A lie. He used Rule One against her in a way they promised they never would again. They were past this, beyond lying for the greater good. They’d beaten all the spoilers life had in store for them. And yet, he lied. She’s
alone in their ship, her womb swollen and her hearts empty. Broken promises lie lifeless at her feet, and River leans against the console to keep her knees from buckling. How is she supposed to do this on her own? Who is she to raise a child? He promised he would be here. *Even the Tuesday afternoons.* Before she knows it, tears are streaming down her cheeks, clouding her vision. The ship hums, singing to her in comforting tunes that he did it because he trusts her more than anything, because she will be amazing.

It fills her to the point of breaking, all the things that would be or could be or will never be tearing apart her insides until River snaps, shutting off her mind to the ship in a desperate attempt for silence. Her eyes fall shut as it all goes quiet, the past and the future and the now. Her mind drifts to a quiet place, somewhere still and sweet that will never be hers.

For a moment, it's all so clear before her, the life they could have had. A *little house surrounded by a white picket fence. There's a swing in the back garden and a fireplace that always keeps them warm.* It isn't much, but it's more than enough. River cooks over their grill because her clumsy husband can't be trusted around an open flame. The man in question covers his eyes, counting to ten as their son hides himself between the sheets hanging on the washing line. The thrill of a lazy Sunday echoes behind her as her husband makes a show of searching for their floppy haired son. The gangly man pounces, tangling himself up in bed sheets, his shoes sticking out the bottom as their child's laughter rings out, dancing on the wind. The cadence of it is all innocence and joy. It warms River deep in her bones, and she thinks, that if she could bottle the sound, she'd never feel cold again.

*She inhales deep, treasuring the moment, memorizing the smell of earth and charcoal and freshly cut grass. Her husband squeaks behind her, a plea for assistance as their son leaps elbows first onto his side. River smiles, her eyes never once straying upward to the sky or worlds beyond because everything she's ever needed is right here on the ground.*

The daydream stings like a cut she didn't know she had, a hole she never knew needed filling. The fantasy is a color she wishes she hadn't seen, because now reality seems bleak. It's something sweet she'll never know the taste of, that still manages to make the present bitter. When she opens her mind again, the chaos of time is almost a blessing, the TARDIS’ music a distraction she desperately needs. Her lips tremble and when she speaks, it’s soft, quiet, broken, and all those things she’d only just learned to let him see. "Why didn't he let me change with him?" she asks the open air, her voice a mere whisper even as her hearts scream. "We could have been human together. We would have been happy."

The TARDIS has no answers, only music. The Old Girl has no arms with which to hold her, only warmth and lights that flicker like the stars they both miss. And deep down, she knows it could never have been that way, that he's right. They couldn’t hide forever, and when the time comes, one of them needs to be ready.

Her son moves before she can, doing summersaults on her bladder, and River wonders if he can hear
her, this ship he’ll never get to meet. River’s hands fall to her rounded stomach, to the only thing that’s real, to the thing that frightens her most in all the universe. It won’t be long now, until he’ll be in her arms. River breathes in deep, finding the strength to wipe the wetness from her eyes. Her cheeks dry, the evidence gone as if it had never been there at all, because she doesn’t have time for tears, for mourning a future that will never belong to her. While she was living in a dream, a new path was written for her. What waits for her now are fractures in the rift and murder weapon she can’t identify and, if she’s not careful, fire and the end of all things.

Steadying herself, River releases a shaky breath, burying all other thoughts as reaches into her pocket. The poison she came here for clenched firmly in her fist, River lets a new brand of determination guide her as she makes her way out of the TARDIS and leaves the box she once called home behind.
Like a book on a shelf

Chapter Summary

It’s been a month since she saw him last, since she canceled their museum date and started dodging his calls. It’s been four agonizing weeks since she left him there to wonder, without explanation or cause, where she’d gone and why she wasn’t coming back.

"When you loved someone and had to let them go, there will always be that small part of yourself that whispers, ‘What was it that you wanted and why didn't you fight for it?’” - Shannon Alder

She feels it before Cal does, the breach. It isn’t a virus or a hacker, more like a syphon. Something or someone has penetrated the heart of the Library, draining it like a leach. The sky turns red, and it looks like roses and sunsets and the blood that used to fill her veins. Alarms blare and River chokes, lungs she doesn’t really have expelled of artificial air because something is taking taking taking. Dr Moon materializes before her, panic blowing his eyes wide. The whirring of alarms fade out, replaced by a ringing in her ears, and it’s only then that River realizes her imaginary friends are staring at her as if she may combust at any moment.

She collapses instead, doubling over in pain. Her knees press into wet grass, and for a moment, her reality flickers. Ones and zeros race behind her eyes, numbers scattering like an ant hill that's been kicked. She's flying or falling or floating amongst code, amongst nothingness, a void of space and computer data. It's only when she tries to breathe that she remembers air isn't something she needs here. She does it anyway, if only because some habits are hard to break. She concentrates on the feel of cool grass, on the mud soaking through her dress, tethering herself to the dream Cal has made for her.

She blinks and the numbers fade, making way for concerned brown eyes. A small hand finds her shoulder and she focuses on that too, on comfort and friendship. This is a good place, now. Monsters shouldn’t be able to touch her here. And yet there's something inside her, a stabbing pain ravaging her until she feels cold and hollow. Cal is speaking, rushed, worried words like diagnostics and unauthorized download. It hits River like an electric volt, a current of energy rippling up her spine, because she's being deleted. No, not deleted, stolen.
River tunes out their voices, attempting to force the invader from her mind. The more she resists the more it stings, like pulling finger nails and teeth, and that isn't right, can't be right, because pain isn't real here. Pain is for the living, not those trapped in the afterlife.

"They're taking you," Cal explains, fear hitching in her child's voice. "I can't stop it."

The red, firewall sky is turning black now, defenses breaking down. She feels it, bits of her life slipping away like a lucid dream, an absence where once precious memories thrived. "We have to break the connection," River gasps, hands balled into fists as she holds tight to things she once tried to forget.

Lakes and astronaut suits and New York alleys, her past unraveling like a loose thread of a sweater being pulled and pulled and pulled and she can't.. why can't she...

"I have to get out," River shouts again. "Cal, you have to teleport me out."

The girls brown eyes fill with dread, panic wracking her tiny frame as she shakes her head. "I can't," the girl protests. "Your body, it's is too badly damaged. You'd never."

"They're taking my memories," River gasps. "They're taking him from me."

"Who?" Cal presses, and River blinks past the hollow places in her mind, beyond the empty spaces, trying to hold tight to something, to someone so, so important that's slowly slipping away.

"I can't remember," she shouts, her breaths erratic, panting from the strain though she doesn't know why. There's no air here, no need for breath and yet hers has been stolen along with everything else. "Please, Cal, we have to try."

"But you'll die," a small voice pleads, and for a moment she sounds exactly like what she is- an ancient little girl with the best intentions and a fear of being alone. She reminds River of someone, of space ships and stars and graveyards and angels. River puts her hand to the girl’s cheek, tethering herself to something familiar, chasing the ghost of a memory just beyond her reach. The touch doesn’t feel like a touch at all. It feels like 01001100 01101111 01110110 01100101 0001010, like a glitch in cyberspace, a wrinkle in a world that's almost real. And what's the point of living if she's losing half of herself? What's the point in a book if it's only half written?
"I died a long time ago," River breathes, and though her words are soft, her mind is fierce, holding to the pebbles of her past as she scans the database for the half-charred corpse Cal keeps in suspended animation.

Cal feels her sifting through the files, those small shoulders going rigid when River finds what's left of the body she once called hers. The girl doesn't protest, but she doesn't assist either, as River merges the files together, her body and mind becoming one. It all happens so fast and yet so slow. Time is a crushing concept after living in a world where it didn't exist at all, where she could blink and cross centuries and stories with so much as a thought. In the real world, seconds are heavy things, beautiful, beautiful burdens that tick by mercilessly without care or concern. Her thoughts condense, one with a body that's broken and burned, and all at once she becomes acutely aware of all those things she's learned to do without.

She has hearts, the organs erratically slamming against her rib cage. Every thump is like thunder to ears that have forgotten how to hear. The blood rushing through her veins is an electric current, or maybe that's just the remnants of the blip in the download still sparking at her insides, a web of lighting dancing in her bones. Someone's hands are on her, a touch unlike anything she felt in the database. It doesn't reek of copper or suspended animation or poorly translated code. It doesn't feel like a replica of something a sick little girl might have once known. No, this touch feels like knives on exposed, unused nerves. Whoever they are, they're taking her pulse, trying to help, and she wishes they wouldn't because it sizzles like water on a grease fire. The smell of burnt flesh, her own flesh, clings to the air. She gags and chokes and someone screams and it's only the raw ache in her throat that tells her it's her own voice. She hasn't felt it in a while, the hum of her own vocal cords and she's sure it never used to burn like this, never used to feel like swallowing a grenade.

Her eyes are nearly blinded. They've forgotten how to see things that don't come in numbers and code. She cannot blink herself away from this place and into another, away from the hands that attempt to soothe her.

“We need a doctor!” Someone yells, and River's hearts double their beating at the sound of it. It's a reflex, second nature, though she can't put her finger on why. She's too confused, too frightened, scared and alone in a reality that used to be her home.

There's something she can't remember, something she was supposed to do or find, but her nerves feel raw, her bones brittle, muscles too weak, unable to hold her own weight. Everything's too soft or too much, too hot or too cold, like ice on fire. Even the simple act of breathing is like needles in numb lungs, and she'd quite forgotten, how much it hurt to be alive.

It's been a month since she saw him last, since she canceled their museum date and started dodging
his calls. It’s been four agonizing weeks since she left him there to wonder, without explanation or cause, where she’d gone and why she wasn’t coming back.

Not for lack of trying, mind. On many occasions she’s picked up her mobile with intent to text or call, to give him a reason why she has to go and he has to stay. But words always fail her. What is there to say to a man who requested not to be given any answers? On more nights than one, guilty feet have threatened to take her past his shop on her long walk home. But always they hesitate, steps stalled in their tracks as his pleading request plays in the back of her mind. She doesn’t have the courage to disobey his wishes. How could she even begin to tell him that he’s the one who drove them apart if he were standing right in front of her?

She could always lie, a small voice whispers, but River tames the toxic suggestion. Somehow, lying would feel like betraying everything they built before. No, if she speaks to him, it will only be the truth. Her stubborn tongue wouldn’t allow for anything else. There’s no way to tell him why she’s gone without telling him everything. It’s selfish of him to once again ask her to bare his secrets, and maybe it’s just old habits that cling to her like a second skin, but there’s no need for both of them to suffer through this. It’s better this way, to cut ties completely. Her absence may hurt him now, but eventually he’ll forget her. He’ll move on. He hardly even knew her at all.

Besides, she has more pressing matters to worry about for the time being. The dead bodies are piling up, which wouldn’t be an altogether unusual occurrence for Cardiff if it wasn’t for the rift activity being at an all-time low. They haven’t seen or heard from the suspect, save for the odd energy signature flickering here and there, since the night River shot her. The girl's handiwork still keeps cropping up, though, and once again River finds herself staring down at a corpse. It's the fourth body they've found in as many weeks, and what's more disturbing is, this one's human.

"White male, late thirties, unmarried, unemployed. Looks like he was trying to get back on his feet."

Jack’s professionally detached voice echoes off the walls of the Hub’s small morgue as he fills her in on the deceased, passing her a folder. River takes stock of the body, of the pale Welshman's skin and the stark white sheet that covers him up to his shoulders. His frame is stiff, rigor mortis only just setting in. River pushes down a wave of pity for the poor soul before hardening her emotions and opening the file Jack presented to her. It's paperwork mostly, autopsy reports and crime scene photos mingling with more personal information of the victim in question. By the looks of it, he's a contemporary, with birth certificates and school photos to prove it. There’s nothing extraterrestrial about him and seemingly no correlation between him and any of the other victims. In fact, they almost missed him, his body turning up in a different post code than all the rest. At first glance, it looked like any other murder. The only indication that it’s her is the message she keeps leaving behind. The same one every time.

You can’t hide forever. The clock is ticking.
It’s getting as annoying as it is unsettling.

“She’s persistent. I’ll give her that,” River muses.

“Not exactly a becoming quality in serial killers,” Jack murmurs, and River walks around the corpse, taking a better look at the rather gruesome bruising around the victim's neck.

“What was the murder weapon this time?”

“The cord to his own bike lock,” Jack explains, gesturing toward a clear bag and a black cord and padlock within. "We found that and the bike not far from the body."

“A crime of passion, then.” River surmises, jaw set as her eyes cut back to Jack. “She’s getting braver.”

“Another quality I don’t relish in murder suspects.”

“ Doesn’t make it not true.” She hums, inspecting the victim once more, because there must be something that ties him to the others. She's far too organized for random killings. Finding nothing, River reaches for the autopsy report again, flipping through the pages. Most of its useless, his blood type and size of his swollen kidneys and medical jargon she has no need for until- "His tachyon levels are awfully high. Did he live near a high activity rift area by chance?"

Jack turns from his work, contemplating. "You know, there is a small one down town."

"Not an extraterrestrial," River proposes, arching a brow as she passes the print out back to Jack. "But he might have smelled like one."

He studies the paper, brows climbing his forehead in pleasant surprise. "Well, I'll be damned."

"Ships already sailed on that, I think." River winks at her friend, any smile that may have been gracing her features evaporating the moment she lets her gaze fall back to the unfortunate victim of
circumstance before her. He'd barely started living before he died, so much potential cut off far too soon. Fate was unfair like that, always taking and twisting the web of people's lives in unpleasant ways. River's heart stung for the body before her as much as she did for herself. In a universe where events are fixed and the future often folds itself around the past, she wonders sometimes, if free will even exists at all. She likes to think it does, that control wasn't just a lie she's been selling herself since the moment she broke free of the Church, that she could have ended up anywhere, but it was her own willing footsteps that brought her here.

But then again, here isn't really something she chose, is it? The Doctor chose it for her, as did the TARDIS. River shudders at thoughts that feel like salt on open wounds as a song begins to play in the back of her mind. The one the TARDIS sang to her in the console room has made a home in her head, a sad little melody playing on repeat that sounds like safe and destiny and sorry and, oh.

“Destiny,” River breathes, her thoughts dangling on a string that’s about to snap, clawing at a thought she can’t quite reach. Her eyes look to Jack, searching for an answer as if it will be written in his arched brow.

“Someone you know?” he asks, clearly not following, which is fair, seeing as her own train of thought is charging recklessly through a dark at impossible speeds.

“No,” she sighs out, a light cracking through the end of a tunnel. “Something I've read.”

River closes her eyes, pacing back and forth, trying to recall the memory that evades her, to scratch the itch, to sift through a head full of archaeology books and theses and essays.

“Destiny does the picking,” she tries. “No, that’s not right. Destiny has done the picking.”

“What are you on about?” Jack’s arms fold over his broad chest, watching her carefully.

“I dunno, not yet, but almost.”

“Because that’s not vague and alarming in any way.”

River huffs, a growl threatening the back of her throat. “I’ve read a lot of things. Hell, I basically was a library at one point. You can’t expect me to remember it all.”
Jack snorts, biting his tongue against a reply. River tunes him out, focusing instead on chasing the elusive thought that dances just beyond her reach. It's like catching a cloud only to realize the vapor has already seeped through one's fingers. She tries anyway, chasing the slippery idea until the vapor has condensed into rain, drops pooling in her hand to form almost tangible memories. A few fretful moments pass as River considers mediocre papers submitted by students and scholars that didn't have a clue. She thinks of things she's written and studied, of newspapers and billboards she glanced at on the street. She thinks of Cal and the adventures they had and the milliseconds or millennia they spent rummaging through the pages of every book in recorded history. She recalls information on thriving nations and lost civilizations, bibles and fairytales, fiction and philosophy and-

You can't hide forever. The clock is ticking.

To die is a bold endeavor when destiny has done its picking.

“IT isn’t a warning,” River gasps. “It never was.”

“What isn’t?”

“The message!” River reaches for the crime scene photos in a flurry. Finding her prize, she thrusts the picture of the bloodied message under Jack's nose until he's staring down at the words that have acted as a calling card for their killer. “All this time we’ve only been seeing the first half, so of course it looked like a threat. But it isn’t, or maybe it is,” River explains, a hint of awe in her voice, almost smiling as the thrill of discovery courses through her veins. “But most importantly, it’s a poem, or quite possibly, depending on one’s interpretation… a prayer.”

“Whose?” Jack asks, as impressed as he is confused.

River merely shakes her head, excitement dying a little on her lips as she admits, “I can’t remember. I’ll need to do a bit of research to be sure.”

Jack snorts dubiously, closing the folder and tossing it back onto the table. “From what I know of them, the Time Lords don’t pray to anyone but themselves.”

“No,” River agrees, contemplating. “Which makes me wonder if she’s playing God.”
“And these murders are what? Boredom? The pulling of some cosmic strings?”

“I don’t know. She’s a Time Lord; they’re all a little bit insane,” River lets out a heavy exhale, lungs expelling the worry in her veins the only way they can. “But one with an agenda, that alone is a dangerous thing.”

“If she’s trying to break them back into this universe, if she believes the prophecy,” Jack shifts on his feet, unsettled by the very idea. “She’ll want this baby to be born as much as we do.”

“It doesn’t make sense,” River fusses, pacing back and forth as she tries to give order to the clues scattered like pieces of a broken clock. ”She said the baby needed to be stopped. How can one stop him and use him to bring the Time Lords back at the same time?”

Jack thinks for a moment, taking a deep breath in through his nose before correcting, “She said he.” His words hang in the air, a magnet that demands River turn, pinning curious eyes on Jack as he continues, "Maybe she didn't mean the baby. Maybe the Doctor's the one that needs to be stopped?"

"From what?" River scoffs. "His perilous adventures in knitting and pub quizzes?"

"Or stop him from hiding," he suggests. "You said the Sisterhood warned that they could find a way back through the Doctor just like they did the Master. Maybe he's as much a part of this prophecy as the baby is."

River can't help but think that maybe that's why the TARDIS is taking his side, that maybe trading one love of her life for another is the price she must pay to have her son and save the universe, too. She sacrificed a normal childhood and parents for the sake of loving the Doctor. And now she's choosing to leave him behind in order to give their child the life she never did.

She must look as fragile as she feels because the next thing she knows, Jack's strong arms have folded around her in a gentle embrace. She’d told her friend all about it, the video that nearly sent her to her knees, the fake watch that betrays any honesty that had been built between them. She came to him with poison in her hands and tears in her eyes and together, they stayed up late as she shouted and cried and told him all the reasons she hated that husband of hers, just a little, for leaving her alone in this.

In retrospect, she probably should have seen it coming. For all their progress, who he was at his core
is still there. He’s always gone behind her back when he thinks he knows best. He's always found it easier to lie when the truth is just too hard. He did it when she poisoned him. He did it when she tore time apart. He did it when he found her in a hospital bed without her memories. He does it every time he tricks his companions into going back to the TARDIS. Her stubborn husband is always playing the martyr, always thinking people are better off without him.

It took a while to realize that, this time, he was right, that they'd never be safe when all the horrors of the universe had a price on the Doctor's head, that half the cosmos would hate their child simply because the Doctor loved him. She was naïve to have ever believed she could have something as simple as a family with someone so extraordinary as the Doctor. Life with him is wonderful and mad and breathtaking, but it's oh so complicated too. It came with risks neither of them were willing to take with their son. And who would have ever thought that the universe would be a safer place without the Doctor in it?

He figured it out before she did- as is often the way with the Doctor- that they’d flown too close to the sun and if they stayed together it would be the universe that burned. The Doctor knew that the only way he’d be strong enough to stay away was if he never knew, that the only way to keep the monsters at bay was to ensure that their son was never anything more than human. It was foolish to think they could outrun their past and change the future, and does it make her weak, that a part of her still wants to try?

She knows it isn't possible, and yet the spark of hope in her hearts refuses to be extinguished. River knows all too well the pain of loving something that one will eventually lose. It’s a lesson the universe has been teaching her all her life. Preparing her for this, she imagines. Thickening her skin and giving her the strength to have a mortal child, to bend the rules of time and turn prophecies on their heads. Her story has always been hers to write but never without cost. And now, all that's left to be done, is everything in her power to keep their efforts, their sacrifice from being in vain.

Jack had held her together as she slowly fell apart. He looked at her with his ancient eyes that have seen more than their fair share of heartache, and spoke with a voice heavy enough to carry the weight of the world when he told her that that’s the trouble with doing the right thing. It’s never easy and it almost always hurts.

He holds her the same way now, her belly between them making it harder to get her arms around him as tightly as she once could. Similarly, his wrap around her shoulders rather than her waist, but still her friend’s presence is as comforting as ever, as steady a rock she may have ever had in the chaos that constantly consumes her life.

"River," he asks softly. "Is it just me or is there something between us?"

She feels him smirk into her hair, and River gives a shaky laugh, air expelled against his shoulder.
"In your dreams, Harkness."

"Only my wildest ones," he grins, pulling back a bit. "Any bigger and you'll start pulling things into your orbit. What's the cook time on half Gallifreyan spawn anyway?"

River lets out a tired exhale. She isn't sure of the incubation period. In all the madness, they never covered that. They never had time for the little things like nesting or sonograms or baby showers. "If he's anything like his father, I'm sure he'll be late."

Jack chuckles at that, his chest a low rumble as his hands smooth up and down her back. "Well, if he's anything like his mother, I'm sure he'll be worth the wait."

River smiles up at her friend, soft and sweet, before burying her head in his shoulder again, hiding the vulnerable shimmer in her eyes they both know is there. If you’d asked her a month ago, she’d have told you she’s never been more excited about the birth of her child. Before, it meant the start of a family, the first day of anything normal in her life. Now, bringing her child into a world where he’ll never know his father, is just another broken thing. All her open doors are slamming shut, and isn’t sure she can do this on her own. She certainly can’t stay in Cardiff. It’s hardly the safest place to raise a child. No, she'll have to settle down in a quiet corner of the universe. No Jack, no Torchwood, no almost husbands to knit their child booties. She'll have to go somewhere no one knows her, hide on her own.

But until when, their human child’s life is spent? She wonders what his plan was, if he imagined she and their child would hide away and live quiet lives, pretending like the urge to run and explore didn't pulse rampantly through their veins. Does he expect her to come fetch him after, come shake him from his quiet life of playing shop keep after she’s loved and lost the best thing that’s ever happened to them? Does he expect her to explain it all to their son one day, why she hasn’t aged a day in decades? Does he expect her to look their child in the eye when he has agelines on his face and wears more years than she does and tell him that his father is alive but he can never ever see him because the universe simply couldn’t cope? Is she supposed to watch him grow old and not think about all the time they could have had if only the universe were fair?

The Doctor left it to her to stay away because the hypocrite knew me never could. But he left no instructions to this shattered puzzle. What was once a dream come true is now just another impossible thing he expects of her. Her once bright future has quickly become just another aspect of her life that she never had a choice in.

River lets out a shaky breath. She's never been fond of deadlines or ticking clocks, but it sure would be nice, just this once, to have an exact date on when the best thing that’s ever happened to her would be born, when the axis of her life would shift and the whole world would be turned on it’s head. "If you run into any murderous Time Lords, do you mind asking for me?"
Jack huffs out a laugh. "Put down the weapon, hands up, oh and by the way, what's the typical gestation period for Gallifreyan babies?"

River snorts, but its halfhearted at best, too exhausted to spare him the laugh he deserves. Jack smooths his hands over her back like he knows. She’s had a rough few weeks and it must show because her friend sighs rather helplessly as he says, “Do you remember that pub we used to go to? The one with all the ex-cons?”

River can’t help the smile that tugs at her cheeks. “How could I forget?”

“How ’bout that time you hustled those Zeto marines?” he reminds, and River laughs openly at the memory, something warm blossoming in her chest.

“You’d think a species with three livers would have been better at holding their liquor.”

“Well, it helps that you cheated,” Jack counters, his teasing tone causing River to give an outraged gasp.

"I'll have you know, I never cheat," she declares. "I simply play by my own rules. There's a difference."

Jack shakes his head, and River can practically feel the way his whole body smiles at the memory. River lets herself sink into it, too, basking in a time when things were no more complicated than the clink of shot glasses and burst of blaster fire. It's only when the quick fix has gone stale, when the warmth in her chest begins to fade that Jack adds, “I’d offer to take you there now, but...”

“I just need some rest," River consoles, her voice almost as tired as she feels.

“Then go home.” He pulls back, dropping a quick kiss to her forehead. "That’s an order.”

River rolls her eyes but holds him tight, giving one last squeeze before letting her arms drop back to her sides. She’s about to turn away when he catches her wrist, brow pinched like he’s in pain as he gazes at her with solemn eyes.
“I could go with you, you know.”

River smirks past the lump in her throat to tease him. “Trying to sweet talk your way into my flat again?”

“Always,” he says with an automatic grin, their playful banter a practiced thing. But then his expression slips, more serious. “When it’s all over, after he’s born,” Jack’s eyes drop to her stomach then back to her, searching. “I could go with you. Just because he’s not here doesn’t mean you have to do it alone.”

She pictures it for a moment—her friend lingering around to help with housework or drive her son to school. She imagines safe hands in which to leave her son when she wants a night to herself. She imagines uncle Jack reading to a boy with hazel eyes and floppy brown hair, imagines him filling a niche, an empty hole that would never be quite enough. It stings more than it salves. And River smiles even though it hurts, stepping forward to give her friend a tender kiss on the cheek.

“Thank you,” she whispers. Pulling away slowly, affection for her friend blooming between her hearts. “But Earth needs you here. Besides someone needs to look after that husband of mine while I’m away.”

As the Doctor, his enemies will always find him, but as a quiet shop keep in Cardiff, he’ll be safe. He’ll be in good hands with Jack. No one will bother with him so long as she can mop up the mess they’re in now. It shouldn’t be too difficult, to eliminate the spy the Time Lords have sent in, keep her son away from vortex energy and prevent the prophecy from ever coming to fruition. And somewhere in all that, read a parenting book or two. She’s accomplished harder things, can’t think of any at the moment, but she’s sure she’s done it.

Jack nods, in surrender or agreement she can’t be sure. But he says nothing else. There’s a smile on his face, mournful and proud. River’s voice is an echo of strength as she walks backwards toward the exit. “Rain check, though,” she sighs, more bitter than it is sweet despite the smile gracing her lips. “Because in about eighty years, I suspect I’m going to need that drink after all.”
The bus ride home takes longer than it used to, or maybe it's just that the passage of time has become a dreadful, arduous thing. Her means of travel certainly doesn’t help. Public transport is as insufferable as she remembers, but on the bright side, it's good to see Glyn. The long hours she’s been working had set them on opposing schedules, but the old man is as bright and friendly as always. He tips his hat and asks about her day, and if he notices her smile has dimmed since last he saw her, he doesn’t mention it. He lets her keep her secrets nestled safely between her hearts where they belong, and despite her maudlin mood, he gives a crooked grin as he drops her off at her usual place.

It's only after the bus has pulled away that River realizes it isn’t the stop she ought to be taking. But he wouldn't know, of course he wouldn't, that she's been behaving these last few weeks, that she's been taking the next stop up, which drops her off much closer to her flat. He wouldn't know that she's avoiding a bigger on the inside shop and the ridiculous man who runs it.

But there's no turning back now, and River takes a steeling breath as she makes her way up the cobblestone path. It's empty, the familiar street taunting her with its quiet nature. It's still and peaceful and unlike anything the Doctor would ever willingly choose. He's wonderful, her husband. He's clever and mad and brave and all those things that she tries very hard to pretend she is. But try as she might, she isn't like the Doctor. She isn’t always sure she wants to be. When she was young and reckless, she made a name for herself on the wrong side of a few star systems. She earned a reputation with the Daleks and burned a few Cyber ships along the way. She doesn't befriend monsters or reason with tyrants like he does. But she also knows the value of small things in a way he never will.

She taught one of her Storm Cage guards the Qualdorian birth song so he could perform it at his daughter's birthday party. She’s passed angry young girls on street corners and given them rides to anywhen because River knows what it's like to feel trapped by the place one calls home. She researches and plans her adventures rather than diving in blind. And after the fighting is over and the smoke has cleared, River sticks around to see the aftermath like he never does. She helps the families of fallen soldiers and establishes new governments because River Song knows better than most that broken things shouldn't be left alone.

Her thoughts drift to her makeshift life waiting for at her flat, to the plants that need watering and the stacks of crosswords she's been neglecting. They're reminders of a broken dream, of what she did with her time before her resolve crumbled and she spoke to him. It's how she passed the time before him, and it feels wrong somehow, to carry on with it after him as if nothing has changed. He always did have a way of consuming her life, making it all the more dull when she was suddenly deprived of him. Being with him is a taste of the extraordinary and the things that once made her content are always all the more bland in his absence.

Maybe that's why she can't bring herself to do them anymore. It makes the pile of newspapers all the more painful to look at when she sees them for what they are, trickles in an hour glass that mark the passage of time. She’s getting bigger by the day and her quickly-expanding stomach is just a foreboding sign that she’ll be on her own soon enough. No more Jack, no more Torchwood, no
more romping about the universe riling up Sontarans. She thinks of the android waiting for her like an eager, obedient, altogether clumsy pet, and sighs, wondering if she'll have to get rid of him too after the baby is born. Depending on the century she settles down in, Ethan was bound to draw attention. Maybe she’ll leave him with Torchwood, and when she finds herself missing the clumsy bot, she’ll smile at the knowledge that he’s no doubt wreaking havoc on Owen’s things. River shakes off the thought, ignoring the nagging feeling that she’ll miss them all, and resigns herself to less than stimulating small talk with her android while she still can.

Her feet carry her slowly up the road, as if they don’t want to return home at all. They’d much rather linger on the sidewalk beneath fairy lights, taking in the silence and cool breeze the way she used to. The door to his shop is closed, but the lights are still on, and River can’t help but come to a stop by one of the trees that line the street. The bark is rough against her palm, and it feels like years since the last time she let herself loiter here, since she watched her husband from the safety of the sidewalk across the road and counted the seconds it took for the lights to flicker on in his upstairs flat. She remembers how it was almost enough, to watch as his chest would rise and fall as he stood at his window and stared up into the night sky.

It feels like a lifetime since she sat at the adjacent coffee shop and watched him as he fumbled with posters and signs. And maybe that’s because it was a lifetime ago. Maybe she was a different person back then, one that lived in a fantasy more than reality. And maybe she should be grateful for that, because for six beautiful months, she got to believe she could have it all.

As if by blessing or curse, the source of her hearts’ desire makes himself known. She watches him in secret as he messes about with more crafts, a net of some kind this time. The ridiculous man is talking to himself, too, by the looks of it, cooing sweetly at electronics as he’s wont to do. And maybe it’s the need to hear his voice again that has her reaching for her mobile, not to call of course, but to listen. He left her nearly a dozen messages that first week, making sure she was alright, asking to reschedule or replan, anything to get her to answer the phone. She saved them all, every rambling voicemail. She wonders how long she’ll keep them, if in years to come she’ll still remember him by them, if she’ll play them by her sons crib just so he’ll know the sound of his father’s voice.

She picks one at random now, one of the first ones he left when there was still jittery hope in his tone.

“You’re probably taking on a zombie hoard or a giant lizard or a radioactive bear,” he starts, and already the cadence of his voice is opening old wounds even as it dulls the ache of new ones. It hardly matters what he says. The sound of it has always been enough to make her hearts beat even as they bleed. “I’m sure you gave them hell. Our lives in your hands, River Song.”

He laughs, giddy and a bit forced, and it’s odd to hear him sound so playful while she watches the man across the street pinch his brow in frustration. Discovery and destitution cling to his frame now as much as they echo is his voice back then. Through the voicemail, she hears him clear his throat,
because that flustered tongue of his never did know when to quit.

“This is John, by the way,” he clarifies. “All’s good here. Not much excitement on my end. Might have a sale on hats if you fancy stocking up for target practice. It’d be great to see you again.”

The trembling of his voice is something she knows all too well, and though he tries to hide it, she can tell that he’s lonely. He sounds as if the four walls of his shop have echoed with naught but his voice for far too long. The line goes quiet for a moment, silence like a noose, and she hears it through the phone, the way he licks his nervous lips.

“Maddie has been gone for days,” he says quietly. “I know what you said, but I just...” he’s strained and she can practically see it, imagine it so clearly, the way he drags his hand over his face as he confesses, “I’m worried.”

He’s hesitant even as he stressed the word, and River can't tell if he's worried for the girl or worried she was right about her. Both probably, knowing him. There isn’t time to linger on it now, of course, because in the next moment, he’s sucking in a deep breath, a smile almost back in his voice.

“But anyway,” he tries again, a forced levity to his tone. “That’s not why I called. Didn’t know if you’d got my messages before or.. or accidentally deleted them or changed your number... though I suppose calling again wouldn’t help if you had, would it? Doesn’t matter. I’m sure you’re just busy. Not like you’re avoiding me.”

He swallows then, a ball of nerves wedged in his throat and her hearts clench to hear it, her eyes briefly shutting to hold back the hurt. She's half certain the only reason she opens them again is because she knows he'll be there when she does. He doesn't disappoint, the present him twisting a coat hanger at an odd angle, grinning madly to himself even as the echo of him on the phone wavers with uncertainty.

“But if you were, because of the, uh, kiss,” he whispers it like a secret and River’s cheek tugs into the echo of a smile. “I just want you to know that I get better, I promise.” A puff of awkward laughter escapes him before he rushes to correct himself. “If you wanted another, that is. Not that I expect it!”

His rambling continues, every desperate word like a knife twisting in her chest. A glossy sheen clouds her vision again, and River sets her jaw. She promised herself the time for tears was done. Determined to keep her own word, River forces herself to close the phone before the message finishes, before the sound of him undoes her completely. She tucks the device back in her bag, and it's odd, how a person can feel so empty and yet so full at the same time. She's filled to the brim with anger, at the universe, at him, and at herself, too. Remorse coats her veins, dark and sticky as tar
around her hearts, because she’d gone and done exactly as he asked her not to. She made him fall for her, and now she has to hurt him, she has to witness him hit the ground without a safety net. She has to be as brave as he is. She has to be strong enough to let go.

It’s what he deserves for what he’s put her through, and yet she feels sympathy for him even as she’s angry with him. And damn him, because no matter the distance between them, she misses him just as much now as she always has and always will. She knows that she shouldn’t linger here, shouldn’t listen to the messages, that she’s only making it harder on herself. She should take shortcuts home and delete the voicemails he leaves her. But she’s always been-

"Bit masochistic, isn't it, being so near to something you can't have?"

Oxygen lodges in her throat, mouth bobbing for only a moment before she forces herself to answer. "I like being reminded of it, I suppose."

She can’t help but wonder if he ever did the same. Did he get himself caught in the Library’s gravity? Did he orbit the planet just to be near her? Did he want to speak to her but never did because she’d already told him he hadn’t? Long after their nights were spent, did he haunt the halls of Stormcage in hopes of stealing a whiff of her perfume? Did he hide among the mass of students at her university just to make sure her young and reckless self was safe? Did he double back on the Ponds in Leadworth and watch Mels steal buses from afar because an echo of his wife was better than no wife at all? Did he break down and kiss her ghost in his tomb because the thought of having her back, even for a moment, was just too tempting to resist?

When her memories were gone and she didn’t know him, when he couldn’t keep away even though he thought it was for her own good, did he miss her then as desperately as she misses him now? Did he have a need deep in his bones to be near her even when it hurt, because maybe, when it comes to each other, they're more alike than she thinks.

The kiss they shared in his kitchen still lingers on her lips, and if she’d known it was the last one they’d ever share, she would have savored it more. She’d have made it last forever, if only she knew.

Lighting flashes as flailing limbs settle on her shoulder and his mouth moves against hers. His lips are unsure but insistent, as eager as he is nervous. She opens her mouth to him, just a little, an invitation he gladly accepts. The tip of his tongue flicks out, and the taste of her must make him braver because his fingers are inching towards her hair, towards the nape of her neck where he likes to cradle her head and fist her curls in his greedy fingers.
Her arms snake around his torso, encouraging him to do so. Brazen hands sweep across his back, pulling him closer. But her touch makes him stiffen where it ought to make him shudder, and his young mouth was only just falling into rhythm with hers when they break apart. The man that’s almost her husband pulls away, fidgeting fingers scratching at his cheek. Lightning flashes across his face and he looks shocked and intrigued and slightly nauseas. The smile drops from River’s mouth like an anvil, like sand in an hour glass that’s finally run out. The pit of her stomach feels empty and her hearts drop to fill the space as her voice cracks over the words, “We haven’t?”

The seconds that follow are a blur of erratic light and a crack of thunder that sounds an awful lot like her hearts shattering to pieces on the cold cement ground. The man that wears her husband’s face steps just beyond her reach in what can only be described as morbid symbolism. He dances away from her, taking her hearts and her hope with him as he spares her a smile and says, “There’s a first time for everything.”

He skips around his shop the same way he skipped back to his TARDIS, full of unspent energy and feet that are eager for reasons he can’t explain. He spins and twirls and swings a net around the room like it’s his partner on the dance floor. Forever the showman, even when there’s no one watching. Well, so far as he knows, anyway. And it’s all so clear when his façade becomes too much for even him, when his flamboyant movements still and his anxious pacing ceases.

He leans against the counter, palms flat and shoulders stiff as his head hangs. A huff is expelled from his lips, blowing his messy fringe from his face. It slips back into place only a moment later, that disobedient strand falling in his eyes as he stares off into nothing, thoughts cloudy and far away. His gaze cuts to the left, and she can tell that he’s thinking about doing something he shouldn’t by the way he works his jaw. He nods once to himself, a decision made as he reaches for the phone. River’s hearts seize in her chest, bracing for her mobile to ring.

But it never does. He stands there a moment, receiver pressed to his ear, and still, her mobile remains quiet. Disappointment and relief battle inside her, because as much as she relishes the thought of a new voicemail, she isn’t sure she’d be able to resist answering the phone. Through the glass, she sees his mouth begin to move. She can’t say if it’s the bite of jealousy or itch of curiosity that has her reaching for the sonic tucked away in her bag, but some unstoppable force has her pointing the device toward the TARDIS, amplifying the call so she can listen in.

When the whirring of her trowel stops, the sound of his voice takes its place.

“Just checking in, wanted to make sure you were alright,” his lips move in time with his words and when a beat of silence isn’t filled by another voice, River realizes that he’s leaving another message, but not for her. “No one seems to be answering my calls anymore,” he half jokes, forced laughter
scratching at his throat in unnatural ways before he sobers.

“If you’re in some kind of trouble...” he tries again, his concerned voice tapering off. Silence mingles with static, empty and bleak, and a surrendering sighs follows. “I’ve got your paycheck. Pretty sure I give you those, anyway.” Another wave of quiet falls over the line, his tongue tied by thoughts he can’t or shouldn’t or doesn’t know how to form. His fingers tap out a nervous rhythm against the counter, and River can hear it faintly above the static when they finally come to a stop as he reluctantly murmurs, “You know where to find me,” before disconnecting the call.

Her sonic screeches at her once more, and River silences it, her arm heavy as it drops to her side. She had warned him that girl was dangerous, and still he’s trying to contact her. A wave of rage washes through her because he gave her his word that he’d tell her if Maddie came back and here he is, rolling out a welcome mat for a murderer. Was nothing he said trustworthy? Were promises she once treated like gold nothing more than dust? Her blood boils with betrayal and her fist clenches and her jaw sets and she has half a mind to storm in there and shout at him until her lungs ache the way her hearts do.

But her anger deflates in a single expelled breath because what good would shouting do to ears that are deaf to her woes and her reasons? When has anything done out of anger ever made the universe a better place? Her rational side buries the impulse, not because a tongue lashing isn’t what he deserves, but because he asked her to stay away, and at least one of them needs to honor their promises.

River turns away, unsure if it’s his wishes or her anger that bids her to continue on home. Her feet move quicker now, ready for bed and a dreamless sleep. She’ll need it if she’s going to look into this poem that could have come from any point in time or space. She isn’t sure she can bring herself to go into the TARDIS again so soon, not even to use it for research. With any luck, a good night's sleep and a clear head will do the trick and she won’t have to. Though, something tells her she isn’t that lucky.

The keys to her building are already in her hand when she rounds the corner. From where she is, River can see the steps that lead to her door of the building. On them sits the small box of paint cans she ordered weeks ago; and inwardly, River’s gut twists at the reminder. The cardboard container has been haunting her doorway for weeks, but thus far, she’s been unable to bring herself to carry it inside, to push it into the lift and carry it into her flat the way she does all her other mundane chores. Taking the cans into her flat means painting the room and unpacking his toys and washing his tiny clothes. And honestly, what’s the point of it all if she’s only going to leave this dreary city for greener pastures the moment she gets her son in her arms?

River approaches the steps, taking them one by one and putting an admiral amount of effort into ignoring the paint cans existence.
Or trying to at least.

It’s of little surprise when she finds the object in question has been pushed directly in front of the door. There’s a piece of paper tucked under the corner, left by a fed up neighbor, no doubt. River sighs, half surprised it took someone this long to complain. She reaches for it, a frown already marring her mouth as she prepares herself for a scolding from an aging millennial.

What she finds instead makes her hearts skip a beat. There’s no threats of discarding the cans or complaints of their being in the way. There’s only an address, a time, and a scribbled message of come alone written on a piece of scrap paper. Hearts in her throat, River looks over her shoulder, finding the streets bare. When she turns back to study the parchment again, scrutiny finds that the handwriting is a bit different, sloppier than the carefully scrawled, bloody messages left near her victims. The girl must have left it in a hurry. But why? If Maddie wanted to harm her, why not just ambush her here? Why disappear without a trace for a whole month only to show her face now?

It’s a trap, obviously. Nothing good ever came from being told to come alone. Even considering heeding the summons is stupidly dangerous. She should call Jack, make a plan, have an out. And yet the thought of that has her lips curling into a bitter snarl. Was it not scheming that got her here in the first place? Is doing the right thing not why she’s alone? She’s rather sick of doing what she should, what’s expected. She’s quite bored of having her agency stolen and her choices made without her consent. Defiance the likes of which she hasn’t revealed in since she wore different skin licks at the back of her mind. The need for recklessness and the promise of freedom, of adventure has her pulse picking up, her blood running warmer.

Maybe meeting with their killer would provide some insight. Maybe if River can discern what the girl wants, she won’t have to go looking for answers from the TARDIS at all. Green eyes fall back to the tempting invitation scribbled onto crinkled paper, to the address that’s halfway across town. Bottom lip pulled between her teeth, River folds up the note, tucking it in her bag alongside her gun. She withdraws her mobile instead, checking the time.

Thirty minutes.

She can still make it.
The man in the dark

Chapter Summary

It's deserted, or so it seems. River scans the open area, finding a cluster of trees taking up residence near the center of the field. A canopy of branches makes it even more difficult to see inside the forested area, but there's no mistaking the shifting she sees within the darkness. It moves in unnatural ways, jerking and over embellished and formless. River's fingers reach for her blaster like a child does their teddy, clinging to a false sense of security from the things that go bump in the night.

She never did have much luck with shadows.

"It's choice - not chance - that determines your destiny." -Jean Nidetch

The library in his ship is nearly as vast as the universe beyond, and yet, she's never felt more claustrophobic than she does at this moment. The book in her lap may as well be a boulder. The truth like a black hole around her, sucking in all light and hope that may have lingered in her hearts. It's hard to conceive how weightless she felt only hours ago, how plasma from the center of the universe lapped at her skin in a gentle caress. She can still taste him on her lips, the sting of rejection like a brand across her ego. Now all she feels is heavy, her hearts turned to stone in the face of what she's just learned.

River pauses the image before her, the faces of parents she can't remember smiling down at her from the holographic projector. The frozen moment casts a ghostly glow over the silent room, and it's odd, how people who are gone can still look so alive. The name Melody hangs in the air like a sickness, twisting in her gut because all along, he knew. John Smith, the Doctor, whoever he is, has been hoarding precious memories in the library of his ship. He kept her real name under lock and key, books about his real identity and the man she killed tucked away to collect dust in the depths of his ship. All along, he's had all the answers and yet he kept her in the dark.

She feels his presence behind her, his nearness making the gravity around her shift. Something deep inside her calls for him, the axis of her being twisting and reforming itself around the hole his absences had left. River breaks the silence first, recounting the memories she has and those she’s lost. Her fingers trace over the book she wrote like it’s something from a dream, a lucid fairytale come to life. She’s surrounded by books and smiles, artificial light and the man she might have let
herself love, and yet she’s never felt so isolated, so alone.

She demands to know who he is and he stutters over his own explanations like a drowning man grasping for anything that will keep him afloat in his sea of lies. The story he told her is unraveling, the walls of the façade he built crumbling down. His frame is taut even as his palms are forward in surrender. Half of him looks as if he might collapse and crawl to her feet to beg forgiveness. She mourns for that part of him, for the sadness lurking in his eyes. It’s what keeps her feet firmly planted, keeps her from sprinting for the nearest exit she can find.

It’s the other half of him that makes her wary, the part buried beneath skin and bones that burns as brightly as a supernova. She wonders how she missed it before, the fire in his eyes that looks as desperate as it is dangerous, as ancient as he is unattainable. It's like seeing two men shoved into the same case, the one she thought she knew and the one history reveres. She doesn't know what's real anymore. The truth is tangled up in deceptions, and it’s hard to tell sometimes, which stars in the night sky are illusions and which ones still burn bright and true.

He tells her it’s complicated and anger builds inside her like a pot about to boil over and burn them both. He’s either a liar or he isn’t, he manipulated her or her didn’t. He’s the man he says he is or he’s not. It doesn’t get more simple than that. Her fists clench, nails digging into her palms and she tells herself it’s the pain of stinging flesh that makes her eyes threaten to water. She buries the vulnerability because he doesn’t deserve to see her cry. She’s already shown him far too much. He’s been privy to far too many of her secrets.

He tells her that deception comes to them as easily as breathing, that to them a half-truth is as good as an open door, a choice. He confesses that he loves her and the depth in his gaze tells her he believes his own story. But he looks unbalanced and uncomfortable, like a fish playing with fire, a warm, beautiful, dangerous thing he doesn’t understand. Is this the kind of woman she was, the kind that fell in love with a god who turns a blind eye to his own immortality, a sociopath who tries his best to be human but never quite succeeds? Was she so broken she found no pain in kissing a man she so easily killed? Or were his lips so sweet, they made living with the lies somehow bearable?

“Yes! I love you enough to lie to you,” he shouts, and it sounds as if something inside him has finally cracked, a desperate sort of need slipping off his tongue. In this moment, he looks like the god the book said he was, like something ancient and dangerous that longs to be understood. When he speaks again, his voice isn’t thunder, it’s snow, soft and pure and cold enough to make her shiver. “We always have. But we lie because we have to, never because we want to.”

Something in her shifts and River gives a derisive snort, eyes finally breaking from his to focus on her belt. “Well it doesn't sound like something I want to be a part of.”

She doesn’t want a lover with a tied tongue. She doesn’t want to wonder which of his smiles are
genuine and which are guarded. She doesn’t want a man who mistakes choice for manipulation.
Her hands tremble as they dig through her belt, hurt and anger and loss of self tearing her apart at
the seams.

The leather around her wrist is warm and River holds tight to that feeling, to something that’s hers,
to choice. Her feet move before they know their destination; the only thing she knows is her need to
be as far from this man as possible.

But he follows after her as she turns, and she feels her chest constrict at the panic in his tone. His
nearness burns and she wonders if it was always like this, if he hurts her even when he’s trying to
help. She weaves through the bookshelves as if she could lose him among paperbacks. There was a
time she could have, when stories bowed to her bidding and time progresses only as and when she
wished it to.

But this isn’t the Library from which she was ripped. This is his ship, his home, and she’s been
hiding in it for far too long.

His protests in her ears are white noise, but it’s only when he reaches for her wrist that River sees
red. It flashes behind her eyes the way the database sky had when intruders stole her life away. The
man before her’s grip feels just as leach-like, as if he takes and takes from her not because he’s
greedy, but because it’s the only way he’ll survive.

“River, please,” he’s begging, tone free of malice and yet so very selfish as he pleads, “I can’t lose
you again.”

His fragile voice reeks of the best intentions, and even so, she can’t help the fury that rises within
her. He kept the truth from her, and if he’s the man he says he is, the man who loves her and knows
her better than anyone in the universe, it only makes the sting of his betrayal sting all the more.

The only person left to trust is herself, and it’s time to take matters into her own hands. It’s time to go
where he was scared to, to stop playing it safe and find these thieves once and for all. It’s time she
stopped guessing and taking the word of a liar. It’s time she got some answers, and the best way to
figure out how a lion eats is to wind up in its den.

River’s practiced fingers type the coordinates to her cottage into her vortex manipulator, certain that
if they’re waiting for her, that’s the one place they’re bound to be. She’s walking into an ambush,
she knows. It’s reckless and foolish, and yet it courses through her veins as sweet as freedom
because no one can stop her or control her or manipulate her with their best intentions.
River sets her jaw, fierce and determined as she gazes into the eyes of the man who tricked her into loving him, into trusting him. Her finger hovers over the button on her manipulator as she takes one last look at the man who dared to tell her what was best for her own life and sighs out, “That was never your decision to make.”

The night is a dark one, a thick blanket of cloud cover blocking out any trace of the moon and stars. The streets are scarce, more so than usual. River marches forward down the empty road, her eyes chasing the shadows that dart beneath street lights. Dust dances in the yellow glow, and she can taste the looming threat of rain on the wind, pavement and petrichor clinging to the breeze. Maybe it's the quiet or the dark or the note still tucked in her handbag, but dread has found its way into her blood, a chill River does her best to subdue crawling up her spine.

The address scribbled into scrap paper waits at the end of the road. She can't see much from this distance, not through the thick blanket of night. But so far as she can tell, it's a park, an open clearing speckled with trees and clear lines of sight from all angles. It's the perfect place for an ambush.

Now, a sensible person would stop. They'd turn tail and walk away. They'd call for backup and play it safe. But River never has been very good at doing what she ought to. She knows it's foolish, her hearts tell her so with every step she takes. The organs in her chest are nearly racing when she reaches the edge of the grass, and it's the ever-familiar kick to her ribs that reminds River to show some semblance of caution as she steps forward into the poorly-lit park.

It's deserted, or so it seems. River scans the open area, finding a cluster of trees taking up residence near the center of the field. A canopy of branches makes it even more difficult to see inside the forested area, but there's no mistaking the shifting she sees within the darkness. It moves in unnatural ways, jerking and over embellished and formless. River's fingers reach for her blaster like a child does their teddy, clinging to a false sense of security from the things that go bump in the night.

She never did have much luck with shadows.

It's only when she hears a sudden clap and the rubbing of palms that River’s grip on her blaster loosens. She takes another step forward, the mysterious figure beginning to take shape in the moonless night. Formlessness gives way to broad shoulders and gangly limbs. Obscure movements meld into tugging arms and inexplicable tools. The manic, haphazard movements could only belong to the Doctor, and as River’s eyes adjust, she finds him standing beneath a tree, swinging a net like a madman. She recognizes it instantly as the one she saw earlier this evening, the one she’d brushed off as part of his craftwork. A similar memory nags at her subconscious and she can’t help but think
back to the last night she saw him, when he hurriedly pushed his supplies off his desk and out of sight. Her stubborn husband was building contraptions even then, and River can’t help but wonder if this is what he’s been up to in her absence, if he’s been sneaking out in the dead of night, overconfident and underprepared, just like always, if he's been chasing after villainous foes armed with nought but scraps, optimism, and half a plan.

River sighs, exhaling all hope of walking into a trap. She's still lightyears away from getting any answers, because it wasn’t an enemy that summoned her here. It was her idiot husband taking desperate measures to see her. Who else would leave a note on the paint cans they bought together? Frustrated though she may be, River can't deny the spark of joy it brings her to know he’s gone to such lengths to see her, that he knew, even now, that she never could resist a well-placed trap. While half of her wants to turn and leave, to not let herself be baited, there's another part, a quiet, mournful part, that whispers that she should stay, that if he's desperate enough to leave her notes and sneak out in the middle of the night to do God knows what, maybe she should hear what he has to say.

He's done all this for her, and it hurts in the familiar, almost fond way it always does when he shows he cares in the strangest of ways. At the very least, she should beg him to stop this, because it's dangerous, because seeing him hurts. She should give him some semblance of a reason as to why she left, why he can't keep looking for her like this. Not that he deserves a reason, but her hearts long to give him one anyway. They've always given one another more than they deserved, forgiveness tangled up with devotion. She tells herself that it isn't the fact that she misses him that makes her feet carry onward, but rather the reasoning that one last conversation will put her at ease that he's safe.

It's a poor justification, she knows. River tells herself that speaking to him would have more cause than simply soothing her aching hearts, that if he's willing to do all this just for closure, maybe she should give it to him. That would be the kind thing to do, to use this as a chance to tell him to move on. She should use this last chance to see him to do what she should have done all along, to make him keep away.

River takes another look at her husband, watching as the most feared man in the universe trips over his own feet. She's suddenly very grateful she never called for backup. It’s a rather interesting setup, given the hour. At his arsenal, he has a cricket bat and a bottle of cleaning fluid. Further inspection finds that he’s attached one end of the rope to a twisted wire hanger, on the hook of which dangles some raw meat. River doesn’t have to wonder what he’s doing. She gave him a taste of the extraordinary and he’s chasing after it as best he can. She introduced him to this world, to monsters and aliens. She dragged him head first into trouble like she always has, and it really shouldn't surprise her that he's chasing after her now, trying to run when he hardly knows how to walk. It's hardly the first time he’s followed her into danger.

*The air is dingy, the steel chair unforgiving. Her jaw aches from where she’s been gagged and beyond her blindfold, River knows she’ll find nothing but oppressive darkness. They may have hindered her other senses, but her ears hear just fine. The creaking of the iron door may as well be a grenade in the quiet room. River readies herself for whatever her captors have in store. She braces herself for a slap or the sting of another poison dart. She expects pain or threats or the press of a*
loaded gun against her temple. But when a soft touch grazes her cheeks, fingertips against her skin a gentle contrast of the ropes biting into her wrist, River thrashes wildly, jerking away.

"Hey, hey, it's okay," a voice soothes, pressing warm palms against her cheeks. River feels her features softening as she tilts her chin towards the familiar sound, brow furrowing in concern as she wordlessly asks, Doctor?

"Course it is," he answers her unspoken question in a sweet whisper. "Can't get rid of me that easily."

He wastes no time revealing her eyes, removing the blindfold with a flourish. She blinks against the dim light, stars bursting in her eyes as she takes in the sight of his lopsided smile. Her hearts stutter and skip in excitement and rage, and when he pulls the gag from her lips she snaps against a raw throat, “What are you doing here?!”

“Given the circumstance, I should think that’s pretty obvious.” He answers with a snort that’s far too lighthearted for their dreary surroundings, the sound of it only infuriating her further. She tried to get away and he went and found her anyway. He’s going to spoil her plans, and worse, he’s going to get himself killed.

"You idiot," River hisses, “You have to get out of here. Go! This is blatantly a trap."

"Well of course it's a trap," her would-be rescuer sing-songs, eyes sparkling and carefree as he playfully taps the tip of her nose. “But don’t worry, I've got everything under-"

She doesn’t see the dart that hits him, but she knows by the way his speech pattern stutters that he’s been hit. His eyes gloss, limbs suddenly heavy, the world far away. She knows because she’s felt it, and her hands tug against their restraints to grab him, because she knows what happens next.

“-control,” he sighs, air expelled like it’s been stolen as River watches as the man who came to save her collapses at her feet.

Eyeballing the surplus of raw meat, River folds her arms across her chest, shaking her head even as a smile tempts her lips. "I do hope this isn't your idea of a second date." She speaks up, taking a small amount of pleasure in the way his scrawny frame spasms from being spooked. He leaps nearly a meter into the air, whipping around with wide, petrified eyes. The fear in them dies the moment he
spots her, fright giving way to a bright grin.

"Why? Are you a vegetarian?" he quips easily, and River steps toward him, pulled in by his gravity. She comes to a stop against the will of her feet, leaving more space between them than she'd like. The man before her notices, always acutely aware of the space between their bodies. The distance makes his smile dim, hazel eyes casting downward as he straightens the net.

He fumbles a bit, long limbs getting tangled in a way only he could manage. Arching a brow at his struggles, River offers, "Would you like some help?"

"And let you have all the fun?" he grunts, giving a sharp tug and nearly tumbling over as the rope finally gives. "Not a chance."

When he looks back up at her, a triumphant grin splits his youthful cheeks. River shrugs, taking a seat on the nearby bench to watch him work. "What are you doing, if you don't mind my asking?"

"Setting a trap, obviously."

"Mhm," River nods cordially, because the only thing he's going to catch is a cold. "A trap for what exactly?"

"Dunno yet, but I couldn't help but overhear some customers talking about curious things in the area. So I started looking into them." He grunts again, tying the rope off to a half-buried spring of indeterminate description as he explains, "Apparently, a while back, a whole block was closed off because of a busted pipe line, but the sewer company never knew anything about it."

"That was us, I'm afraid," River says, a sympathetic smile stretching her lips. "Do you remember the mongrel-like aliens that attacked us? Well, they had friends. My team and I had to dispose of their bodies. That was the cover story."

"Oh." He deflates, adjusting the wire hanger just so. "What about the trash bins? Word on the street is some kind of creature has been raiding them."

"Ah," River nods, half smiling. "That'd be an associate of mine. Still a horrid creature, but not a dangerous one."
That stubborn mouth of his pouts, contemplating for a moment before he turns to her with a furrowed brow. "And the strange lights? The noise complaints? All you?"

This time River gives pause, her own curiosity peaked because, "No, actually. What sort of noise complaints?"

The spark of having the upper hand once again makes him brighten, the skip returning to his step. "All sorts from all over town, but there's a heavy concentration in this area. They say it sounds like thunder, but there's no storm clouds."

River drags a heavy breath in through her nose, that worried feeling once again prickling at her spine. She knows well what the crash of thunder means when there isn't a storm. She's felt lightning on her skin when there's no cloud in sight, and River shifts in her seat, because who knew small talk around town would give her more information that all the high tech equipment Torchwood has to offer.

"I'm sure it's nothing," River lies. "Probably just some teenagers playing with fireworks."

The man before her shakes his head in that way he always does when he's working on blind instinct, evidence be damned. "No, this is something else. I can taste it."

And there was a time when he probably could, when his tongue would flick at empty air and taste the leftover static, when he had but to breathe in deep for answers to fill his lungs. He was ever the detective, her husband, always putting his nose in places it didn't belong. River pointedly ignores the devil on her shoulder that tells her that’s the only reason he was drawn to her, that it wasn’t her at all, but rather the mystery she’s always brings in her wake.

The patting of skin on skin brings her attention back to him. He's finished his task, dusting his hands off as he approaches her. With his usual lack of grace, he slides in next to her on the bench. River stiffens slightly, hoping he doesn't notice that she reeks of gun smoke and formaldehyde, of stale air and sleepless nights. He, on the other hand, still smells exactly the same. They haven't been this close in a month and still the nearness of him is as natural as breathing. She tries not to think about the last time he was this close to her, how his hands were in her hair and his mouth was eager for her. The aroma of burnt eggs permeated the air, and River swears that, even now, the phantom smell of it is enough to make her insides coil.

“I was planning on hiding in the tree,” he sighs out, gaze cutting to her out of the corner of his eye.
"But good luck getting you up there in your state."

River makes a faux show of being affronted, the tension in her frame easing just a bit. "I could climb a tree! I'll have you know I've scaled level seven ice cliffs before." Her spine straightens, chin tilting proudly as she adds, "I did it with one arm and no coat, in fact."

"Are you making that up?" He twists to face her, gaping in awed disbelief, and River answers him with a smirk full of secrets and dancing eyes.

"You'll never know."

It's his turn to shake his head, eyes breaking from hers to stare at his feet. The toes of his shoes shuffle softly against the grass, fidgeting as much as he can from his seated position. He must be fit to burst with questions, because unspent energy hums off of him in waves, giddy at the sight of her. But he’s wary too, like he's afraid she'll spook at any sudden movement, like one wrong word will make her vanish like a fine mist. She should feel guilty about that probably, and perhaps she would have if the cards they'd both been dealt hadn't been stacked by him.

It's that thought alone that bids River to hold her tongue, to let him squirm as her silence itches at his skin. Eventually, the stillness gets the better of him, or perhaps he interprets it as a challenge, taking the opportunity to fill it by softly saying, “You disappeared on me.”

It's an accusation as much as it is a statement. A knot forms in River’s throat instantly, a shallow breath in her lungs nearly choking her, because speaking to him has always been as much cause for scar tissue as it is a salve. “I did, yes.”

It's a careful answer, an agreeance that offers him no more facts than he already knows. He wants more, expects more, in that insufferable way he always does. His need to know, to dissect and understand, is no less prevalent now than it's ever been. It's why he's here after all. He never did know when to quit. The shuffling of his feet slows, never taking his eyes off his shoes as he presses, “Because you were busy?”

He sounds hopeful, optimistic, just the hint of a smile revealing teeth as bright and white as a wedding gown. The innocent gesture lasts only as long as her baited breath, because when River lets out a heavy sigh, the fading light in his eyes speaks only of surrender. The urge to lie triggers like a reflex, catching on the back of her tongue like bile. But she shuts her eyes, willing herself to be strong as she exhales the truth. “No.”
It's heavy, and the singular word sits in the air around them, stagnant as murky water. River's eyes cut to the man that's almost her husband, and she can't help but notice that the hope in his eyes has dimmed, that he looks like a drowning man as he finds the courage to ask, “Is it about the kiss?”

"Yes and no," River evades, still watching him carefully, studying the lines that crease his eyes, the flex in his jaw. He's a picture she could paint with her eyes closed. The feel of him a caress she knows all too well, and she pulls her lips between her teeth at the mention of his mouth on hers, trying to keep back the rush of emotion his kiss always inspires.

She blinks to break the spell, refusing to look at him. Her answer must have come out thicker than she intended it to, rich with tingle of his touch, because his own shy gaze shifts toward her, a twitch to his lips. “Care to elaborate on that?”

“Not particularly,” she answers on a light laugh, keeping the harsh truth at bay with a tender smile. Green eyes dare to find his again, and she regrets it the moment they do. She always gets lost in that pool of hazel, the labyrinthine of secrets and affection waiting for her like a honey trap. Their eyes lock and she swears she hears his long ago voice echoing back at her as she explains, “It’s complicated.”

He hums at her decided lack of answer, choosing instead to change tactics altogether. “I was worried about you.”

It's as much of a scolding as it is a confession of care, and River finds herself sitting a little straighter, half-sick from the feeling in her gut telling her to leave and not look back. “Well,” she quips, detached and quick, "as you can see, I'm fine.”

“Is that some sort of alien hunter code?” he counters, tone too sharp to match the puppy dog eyes looking up at her from beneath his messy fringe. "Because you don't look fine. You look like you want to slap me and I'd really like to know what I've done wrong.”

He isn't wrong. Her fingers flex with need, to lash out, to touch him, to hold him or hurt him, to do anything that justifies her continued presence here. His eyes plead with her for answers she can't give, and River's tongue faulders over truths she simply can't say. “It's not…” she tries, struggling to find words. "It isn't like that, John. You didn't do anything wrong." River shakes her head, untangling her own truth from her lies. "I should never have gotten close to you. This is my fault."

The confession makes him sheepish, scuffing the toe of his shoe against the dirt. “Why are you here if you don’t want to see me?”
“I never said that,” she corrects him quickly, and a smug smile stretches across her husband’s face.

“So you do want to see me?”

“Of course I do. It’s just…”

“Complicated?” he asks, tone hitching with annoyance. “Then explain it to me, because you’re the most amazing woman I’ve ever met.”

“John, stop. Please.” River shuts her eyes, trying to distance herself from the praise she knows is about to spill from his tongue. But he doesn’t hear her or heed her trembling tone because the words fall like a faucet at full blast.

“You’re clever and brave and kind and funny, and I thought we were… I mean we… and then you vanished. You both did, and I–"

*Both.* The reminder twists like a knife, a distraction from the pain swelling in her chest that gives her determination to ask, “Have you seen Maddie since?”

The interruption derails him, pained though his face may be. He sighs, scrubbing a hand over his face as he answers, “No.”

There’s hesitation in his voice, and when River speaks, her own is nothing if not a warning. “John, if there’s something you’re not telling me–"

“I’d never lie to you River,” he snaps, somehow managing to be gentle despite the frustration bubbling in his core. “I wouldn’t betray your trust.”

He sounds like he means it. And she knows him well enough to know by the tone of his voice that he probably does. Or so he believes. Her trust is always the last thing he wants to lose, unless breaking it is the only way to do what he thinks is right. Suffice to say, his word isn’t a comfort. It’s hard not to be angry with him, this man who wears the same face as the man who stranded her here. He is very much the same and so very different from the one she married, the one who chose to lie and leave her behind. What he’s done may have been the right thing, but that doesn’t make the sting
of betrayal hurt any less. In fact it only makes it harder to trust him now.

“I may have tried to call her a few times,” he admits. “But I never saw her. I’d have told you if I did, like I promised,” he sighs, sounding rather petulant as he adds under his breath. “Not that you’d know, as you haven’t taken my calls.”

River breathes out through her nose, disturbing the stillness and calming her heartbeats. His ridiculous contraption creeks in the night breeze, a reminder of why they’re both here, that he needs to stop all this and lead a quiet life. She tells herself that she owes him nothing, not after what he’s asking of her, after what she’s preparing herself to do. And yet something inside her is already crumbling, weak to his wants even now. Her defenses slip, her tongue loosening with them, as she finds the courage to admit, “I listened to all the voicemails you left.”

The confession takes him by surprise, a sneaky smile tugging at the corner of his mouth as he looks away. It must have been the magic words, breaking the spell of defeat that sat on him like a fog, because his feet cease their shuffling. The balls of his toes bounce instead, his knee jittering with anticipation. She thinks the movement must have brought him closer somehow, because when he speaks, deep and low, she feels the vibrations of it like a livewire beneath her skin.

"Not that I’m complaining, but how did you find me here anyway?” A hint of smugness rolls across his tongue, and River’s smile plucks at the edges, curious and confused as she turns to face him.

“I got your note.”

His brow furrows, expression mirroring hers. “What note?”

“The one under my door..” she starts to explain, but when his invisible brows only climb higher, River stiffens. The hairs on the back of her neck stand on end, suddenly alert. Green eyes break reluctantly from his, scanning the tree line for anything that might lurk in the darkness. It’s quite, too quiet, and her instincts roar to life, her voice a warning as she reaches for the Doctor's hand. "We should go."  

She can feel how his whole body stiffens in surprise, but he doesn’t pull away. If anything, he sways toward her even as he protests. "What? Why?"

River finds her feet as effortlessly as her eyes roam back to him, pulling him to stand beside her. "Because someone invited me here. Someone wanted us in the same spot at this exact time."
The man before her looks mortified even as he licks at his lips, tongue sneaking out to taste the air the way it does when he's caught the scent of a mystery that needs solving. River doesn’t allow herself to be distracted by it, by how familiar he is even in this form. She focuses instead on their surroundings, her free hand already creeping its way toward the blaster tucked into her bag.

"Why would someone want us together?" he asks, bewildered, and River must blanch at the reminder of all the things he doesn’t know, because he corrects his words the moment they leave his lips. “I mean, I know why I would want.. But a stranger?"

"I never said it was a stranger," River warns, eyes cutting back to his, pinning him in place. “And it's not as wild of an idea as you might think."

His jaw slacks in disbelief, the fringes of a laugh caught in his throat. "But why would someone care where I am? I'm not..” he shakes his head again, batting away the ridiculous notion. “I'm not important."

There's a crude sort of acceptance in his tone, words spoken by a man drunk on a mediocre life. River's hearts break at the sound of it, because it burns, that if even for a moment, he ever thought he was anything less than extraordinary. She has to look away for fear that he'll see the pain in her eyes, that he'll read her emotions the way he once would have, that he'll unravel her resolve with a single touch.

Her eyes cast downward, and suddenly she feels it weighing on her bones, all the reasons he didn't want her to speak to him, to give him a taste of the life he'd left behind for the sake of their child's safety. Under the guise of keeping watch, she turns away from him. She needs space from his affectionate eyes, something she hasn't done since she was young and scared of the love she found in his gaze, of what he'd do for the sake of her.

She’s still speaking to the grass when words finally form, and a better woman, a stronger woman would have swallowed them. But she simply can’t, because if she kept them in, surely the sentiment would devour her from the inside out. “You’re more important than you realize, John.”

Silence follows, and God knows what he's thinking, what he thinks of her and why she's acting this way. But she can almost hear it, the way his thoughts seem to shout important to whom? He opens his mouth, lips parting, but she’ll never know for certain what thought sparked on the end of his tongue, because a flicker of light disturbs the darkness, demanding both their attention.
“There! There it was, the light show!” the man beside her shouts, all other thoughts withering as he gestures a few blocks away. “Did you see it?”

His announcement rings in the darkness, loud enough to make River wince. He doesn’t seem to notice or care, his worry replaced by the thrill of the chase. Attentions now devoted to the road a few blocks away, his hand slips from hers, feet carrying a few paces away. The loss of his presence makes a cold shiver run up her spine, or maybe that’s just her instincts kicking in, telling her to run, go, leave, find a way out.

River follows his line of sight to a vacant street, fear dancing along the fringes of her tone. “Whatever it was, it’s long gone now. Please, John, let’s just-.”

“Not a chance,” he argues, not bothering to glance her way. Fleetingly, she wonders if it would change his mind if he did, if the scared crinkle of her brow would be enough to disarm his need for trespassing where he doesn’t belong. “There’s been funny business around these parts for weeks. This is my chance to figure out what it is.”

River has only enough time to sigh, a half-formed protest of, “Sweetie-“ when an all too familiar crackle ripples across the airwaves like a grenade tossed into placid water.

The knowledge that it’s a vortex manipulator registers before her eyes can snap to attention, turning to find a dark-haired girl in a brown leather jacket. Rivers jaw sets, her grip on her gun tightening, but it’s the Doctor that speaks first, sounding shocked and awed and a million miles away when he gasps out, "Maddie?"

The girl spares them little more than a worried glance before bolting, tearing off down the road. “John, don’t!” River calls out, her shouts in vain, because before she can stop him, her idiot husband is already in pursuit. His feet move faster than his common sense, leaving River no choice but to follow after.

Maddie must hear River's protest or the pounding of feet against pavement, because her efforts double, sprinting down the street as if her life depends on it. It isn’t like the last pursuit. The girl never even looks back. She doesn’t shout or duck into alleyways. She doesn’t lay down cover fire or offer cryptic warnings. She merely races forward, twisting and turning, less like she’s trying to lose them and more as if she means to find something. The Doctor is faster, but River does her best to keep up, a protective hand on her stomach as she attempts not to jostle her bundle of joy. Her son kicks her ribs in response to her racing hearts, and River lets it spur her forward, trying to close the distance.
She’s almost caught up to her husband when Maddie makes another sharp turn, taking off down a deserted street. River only just manages to grab her husband’s arm as he makes to follow after. His pace slows but doesn’t stop, pulling River with him as he rounds the corner. Despite her heaving chest, River swears it’s the sight she finds that steals her breath. A few yards ahead, Maddie comes to a stop in middle of the road, panting as she turns to face them. River’s grip on the Doctor's arm slows their pace, and she allows momentum to carry them only a few more steps before she pulls him to a stop.

"Maddie," the Doctor pleads, his torso gravitating toward the girl despite River's iron grip on his arm. "What are you doing here? Where have you been?"

The girl doesn't answer, keeping her secrets locked behind panting lips. Her eyes shift about the empty street, nervous or scared or expectant, and why did she stop running if she has a vortex manipulator? Why did she lead them here?

She's alone and unarmed, and still the hair on River's neck stands on end. Little tremors in causality sing in the back of her mind like a guitar string being plucked. Time lines shift around her like leaves in the wind. Small aftershocks of raw potential ripple in the air like a static charge. River draws her gun, leveling it at the girl just for good measure. She doesn't intend to shoot, not with him watching anyway. He does get ever so cross when she shoots his friends.

In typical idiot fashion, the man in question gasps, leaping in front of her loaded weapon. "River, what are you doing?" he demands.

"This is a trap!" River hisses back, shoving him aside.

“It isn’t. Of course it isn’t,” the Doctor argues, pleading and sputtering. "Maddie, tell her."

When he turns back to face his assistant, the girl is shifting, taking a few careful steps to the left. River counters the movement, putting herself between the girl and the Doctor before he can do anything stupid like try and protect one of them.

"Maddie?" the Doctor tries again, and if he sounds wounded, then good. Maybe he's finally taking a hint.

Maddie takes another calculated step to the left, and when River mirrors the movement, keeping the
distance between them, the girl releases a heavy, surrendering breath. “I'm sorry,” she says, her quiet voice filling the empty street, her expression almost pained. "There’s no other way.”

Beside her, the Doctor frowns in confusion, and River feels it like static across her skin, a split second of white noise her only warning before the rift opens on top of them. The tear in space time knocks the air from her lungs or maybe it fills them, fills every inch of her with energy, with stardust and ultraviolet light, with the dust of time and sparks of long-extinguished solar flares. Raging time winds makes her hearts stutter, the blood in her veins burning as raw vortex energy soaks into her skin.

The kinetic shock wave sends River and the Doctor reeling in opposite directions. The pavement slamming against her back is a reprieve from the fire in her bones, the world turned sideways as she watches the Doctor fly into the nearest building, body crumbling like a rag doll. Her vision is swimming, half-blinded and dizzy, ears ringing as she tries to stand. A wave of nausea hits her like a brick, a white-hot pain coursing through her insides. Fighting back the bile she’s sure is caught in her throat, River attempts to stand, to stagger to her feet, because she must, because her husband is unconscious a few meters away.

Because the woman who lured them here is slowly walking toward her.

Maddie approaches her slowly, cautious of the still-sparking space time anomaly. River reaches for her gun in a daze, patting at the pavement around her in a desperate search. Realizing her weapon must have gone flying, River swipes at the air instead, at the girl she’s sure is still a few meters away. The sudden action makes the ringing in her ears intensify, pain pain pain licking at her chest and fingertips.

Maddie inches forward, her form flickering like a mirage as River blinks, willing her vision to stop swimming. The girl takes another cautious step, a hand outstretched, when another sound cuts across the darkness. It’s a shout or a bang, deep and foreboding, and it makes Maddie freeze in her tracks, whipping around. Another imposing figure makes itself known, taller and cloaked. She’d think it were Jack, swooping in to save the day, if it weren’t for the clipped steps. These short strides are nothing like her friend’s, and even with her blurry vision, River can see the terror written on Maddie’s face. The girl shouts something back at him, but River’s muddled ears can’t make it out. Whatever she said is lost to white noise echoing in her stunned eardrums.

The cloaked figure steps closer, and she might even think the two were allies if it weren't for the way Maddie abandons her cause, bolting back down the road from whence she came. The newcomer’s presence is comforting and terrifying. Is it friend or foe that hides their face hidden beneath a heavy coat? The clothing is out of place for this time of year, and River thinks that she’d make a quip about his dress code if only she could hear herself think.
River dedicates her remaining energy to trying to stand, bracing herself against the curb as she crawls to her knees. The figure is still yards away when it pauses. Though she can’t see their face, she’s certain they’re watching her. She feels the gaze crawl across her skin, and she studies her potential ally in return. River’s eyes are slowly coming into focus again when she notices that they’re holding something, clutching it to their chest like its precious. It’s a device of some kind, or so the high-pitched chirping sound would suggest. Whatever it is, it doesn’t sound good, and her suspicions are confirmed when a glowing light pulses, red to orange to yellow in the newcomers palm. Whoever they are, their features are still muddled like a water painting, but River can tell by the twist of their head that something has peaked their interest.

They look as if they’re about to take another step forward, when River hears Maddie whistle, a taunting little sound. The figure glances in the girl’s direction like a dog that’s been summoned. His grip on the precious device tightens, muttering words River doesn’t quite catch in her direction. Whatever it was, it’s soft, spoken like a promise or a salve. River tries to speak back, to call out, ask who or why, but it’s over before she gets the chance, because Maddie shouts again, farther away this time, and the figure rushes after her, chasing the girl down the street.

River gives the mysterious interloper only a fraction more of her attention. She’ll ponder on it later when she body isn’t sparking and screaming, when her husband isn’t helpless and unconscious before her. Her gun is a lost cause, so she fumbles for her mobile instead. Luckily, it’s in her bag right where she left it, and her fingers work instinctively, calling for help from the only man who can give it.

Jack answers within moments. She can tell by the screen on her mobile, by the numbers counting up. Faintly, distantly, she hears his voice calling her name. She’s gasping or choking into the phone, trying to get her breathing under control, trying to tame the ache in her stomach and the haze in her mind.

“Jack,” she croaks out, her own voice far away.

“River! Where are you? What’s going on?”

Everything sounds muffled, like it’s under water, like a grenade went off in her hands. But it doesn’t burn anymore. It tickles, pain finally easing into a warm numbness. River swallows hard, taming her breathing as the sharpness fades. In its place, a tingle spreads through her chest and down her arms. River lifts her hand, eyes blinking into focus on her palm, on the glowing energy radiating like solar flares. A golden hue she hasn’t seen in years spills from her fingertips like a cup that’s too full, like boiling water bubbling over the edge of a pan. It isn't enough to make her brand new, just enough to surround her in a soft halo of light. It’s almost hypnotizing, the way sprinkles of sparkling dust float from her skin into the night sky.
“River!” Jack tries again, shattering her stunned trance. “Is everything alright?”

“No, Jack,” she pants out, swallowing against a dry throat. The pain in her stomach recedes, replaced by a different wretched, uneasy feeling as drops of regeneration energy that aren’t hers flicker and fade from the tips of her fingers. “I really don’t think it is.”

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