And All The Little Deaths Before

by CompanyPolicy

Summary

No, I didn't ask for this. I never wanted this sort of responsibility at nineteen years old, but now I have to deal with it. What I want doesn't matter. Hell, maybe it had to be me. That seems about right. I mean, I really wouldn't trust somebody else to do the job right. Somebody else would get it wrong.

It had to be me. I'll get it right.

Notes

I'm transferring this from my ff.net account, so please don't report it as theft! I won't be deleting the version of ff.net. I just wanted to have all my currently published fanfic on one account somewhere. If I do (eventually) update this fic, I'll also update the version on ff.net.

See the end of the work for more notes.
God's Having a Rave

It was the middle of summer vacation. I was home alone for the first time in months; my parents weren’t there to constantly breathe down my neck about wasting my life away on the couch. I was ready with a stack of classic scifi movies and a huge bowl of popcorn. I had just settled into my well-worn dip in the couch, but guess what the power decided to do? If you guessed flicker on and off randomly like an asshole, you would be correct. For the past hour and a half, I had checked the breakers, changed every lightbulb in the house five times, and called the power company six. The phone operator had informed me that nothing was wrong with the power lines and that no one else had called about power surges. On the sixth time they finally agreed to send someone to check the connections.

So, there I was, pissed off and forced to sit and wait while the power continued to mock me. I’d been sitting there playing Uno with myself for half an hour when a flash of lightning flooded the living room and front yard with blue-white light.

I scowled and began grumbling, "Wonderful. First the power goes crazy, now there’s a storm."

Tossing my cards down onto the table, I trudged into the kitchen in search of snacks. I had just gotten the box of gushers when there was another flash. Startled, I nearly toppled from the chair I was using to reach the top shelf.

When I regained my balance, I asked myself, Where's the thunder?

Another shock of lightning, but I could see where it hit now. The very edge of the backyard lit up like a spotlight was shining on it.

"Of course it would be my backyard. Why would I ever think it wouldn't be?" I muttered jadedly.

Now, I'm not a naturally curious person. I like to stay on the safe side of life most of the time; adventures open up the possibility for injury or err. But not tonight. Tonight I was too pissed off to stay away. So, as quickly as I could, I got dressed—jeans, t-shirt, converse—grabbed a flashlight (and my purse as a gut instinct decision), and headed out the back door.

Never before had I regretted having such a huge backyard. Now, I had.

In retrospect, I probably shouldn't have spent so much time preparing, though braving the storm in pajamas couldn’t have been a much better idea. Then again, stepping outside in these conditions wasn’t exactly smart at all. The weather had gotten so much worse; I could vaguely recall a hurricane from years ago with similar conditions. Huge gusts of wind threatened to blow me over. My flashlight was nearly ripped from my hands when I reached the halfway mark, and the conditions were only getting worse. The only good thing was that it wasn't raining. Yet.

I paused in my stumbling steps to stare up at the sky. Smaller bolts of lightning rained down until the entire scene looked like God was having a rave. One shard of electricity got a bit too close, forcing me to dive left and into the ground.

Thankfully I wasn't wearing white. A small mercy.

I struggled to my feet but was shoved face first into the giant oak only seconds later. My reaction time was better than I thought it would be. My arms managed to get between the tree and my body before I collected a knot on my skull. I did earn a bruised forearm and sore wrist in trade, though.
Peering around the trunk, I realized immediately that I should've stayed inside. All the lightning was converging at one spot only fifteen feet away. Electricity crackled across my skin. I could taste it on my tongue. Then the sound started. It sounded like someone was trying to crank an engine but failing. A light pulsed among the lightning into time with the sound.

*Why is that familiar?* The inquisitive thought caused me to edge closer until I was braced against the other side of the tree and peering around it at the absurdity happening before me. Useless thoughts raced through my mind as the light brightened and the wind shrieked. I had lost my hair band somewhere along the way so now my hair was whipping around my face like a mass of angry snakes. My hands were so tightly clenched that my short nails were digging into my skin. I had been holding such a deep breath that my lungs felt as if they were going to burst in my chest.

The light had gotten so intense it scalded my eyes even after they were closed. I dug a hand into my hair to rip it out of my eyes as I forced myself to open them so I would actually see the monstrosity convulsing in my yard. The lightning, the swirling wind, the grinding noise—everything led up to one gigantic crescendo . . . that ceased into silence after one deafening explosion of thunder.

Blinking furiously to clear spots from my vision, I finally saw what the lights had concealed.

*What the hell is a police box doing here? Better yet, what the fuck was the lightning storm about?* Smoke—or steam—spewed off it and into the air. The door shook and rattled piercingly. Whoever—or whatever—was inside wanted out.

Maybe I should leave. No success in moving. I was completely frozen.

The clatter stopped.

Adrenaline and fear rushed through my veins with my heart pumping so fast it threatened to stop.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

The scream that nearly wrenched itself from my throat was stopped by coughing and sputtering. My heart had literally stopped for a second. Still gasping, I finally managed to move but tripped on a root and sprawled backwards in the dirt. I cursed everything and anything. Today just had to be the day my bad luck caught up to me.

Hiding behind the tree was easy. Did I feel safe? Hell no.

Bang! Bang! Ba-crash!

From the sound alone I could tell parts of the door had cracked and splintered. Smoke—definitely smoke—swirled obnoxiously around my face, invading my airspace and forcing me to breathe it in. Someone stumbled out of the police box. They coughed raggedly before gagging and cursing in some language I didn't recognize.

Taking a risk, I peeked out from my hiding spot.

A man was leaning against the box. He was gasping for breath in between coughing fits and, from what I could see, drenched in sweat. He reached into his left pocket and pulled something out. It was long and slim and had a bright, blue light on the end. It made a soft whirring noise when the man turned it on.

I squinted to get a better look at it. *Is that . . . No, it couldn't be. That guy does not have a sonic screwdriver.*
The device flashed twice and beeped. A sneer made its way onto the man's face.

"I know you're there. Come out before I make you."

Okay, I know I'm not the nicest person in the world. I've heard and spat out my fair share of insults; but few people had ever spoken to me with that much venom and disdain and even those hadn't frightened me like this stranger did.

Air hissed in and out of my lungs through clenched teeth as I steeled myself. Slowly, I stood and slid around the trunk, keeping my body as close to the tree as possible.

The man glowered at me. Even as sick as he was, he sent chills down my spine.

Apparently, it showed because he sneered before speaking.

"Who are you? What do you want?" His sneer grew, if that was possible. "And don't bother lying. I'll be able to tell."

I twitched. I was normally a polite, quiet person but not now. I didn't care who this crazy bastard thought he was. He wasn't going to give me orders.

Giving him my own sneer, I snapped, "I could ask you the same thing."

He chuckled coldly but sobered almost immediately. "Be thankful, ape, that I don't kill you. Unfortunately, I need one of your kind to fix my dimension."

Grunting, he shoved off the box and staggered towards me. He raised the screwdriver, pointed it at me, and pressed a few buttons. Whatever it did, it wasn't what he wanted. He frowned then morphed his puzzled look to a poker face.

"Who is Bad Wolf and where can I find them."

_Fantastic, another friggin' order! And he's asking about Bad Wolf! That's just great. He's stupid and crazy. A perfect combination._

Once again my thoughts must've been displayed on my face because the man bared his teeth at me and snarled. "I don't have time for your puny ape mind to comprehend the severity of the situation! Now tell me where Bad Wolf is!"

I pressed myself against the oak so tightly my skull began to ache. I hated being yelled at. I especially hated being yelled at by dangerous lunatics who randomly popped up in my backyard.

I paused to inhale deeply, in hopes that it would calm my rage some. "Bad Wolf doesn't exist. If you're looking for Billie Piper, she's a few thousand miles North East of here in England." Keeping myself as calm as possible, I asked, "Who are you?"

The man scoffed but seemed to contemplate it. Moments later he answered, "The Master."

Whatever fear I had left while my feature slid into a deadpan expression that screamed "You've got to be kidding." But no, from the look on his face, he was definitely not kidding. Raising an eyebrow, I asked with an only slightly mocking tone, "You're The Master?"

"The Master" caught on immediately and was back to sneering again. "If you're done being a pest, you can be a useful ape and _tell me where Bad Wolf is._"

His sharp tone didn't even make me flinch. I was contemplating exactly how this deranged
Whovian had gotten out of his mental institution and into my backyard with an exact replica of the TARDIS.

The Master scoffed, "It seems humans are always useless, no matter which dimension it is."

I snorted and crossed my arms. "I could be of more use if you actually explained why you're in my backyard ranting about Bad Wolf and looking like an overall Whovan lunatic."

"What the bloody hell is a Whovian?"

I blinked. Definitely had been expecting that. "Oh, well, um, ya see," I fumbled, "a Whovian is a fan of the show Doctor Who."

"Doctor Who?"

"Well, yeah, it's a British TV show about a man, a Time Lord, The Doctor, who travels around the universe in his TARDIS—" I stopped rambling when I noticed the look he gave me; a look of puzzlement, one that questioned my sanity and of general 'what the fuck'. "I thought you knew about it," I trailed off awkwardly to look down and fiddle with my hands.

He scowled, "Why would you think I was a part of one of your stupid human cliques? Rassilon, you apes keep getting stupider."

"It's not my fault you showed up here with an exact replica of the TARDIS and waving a sonic screwdriver around, claiming to be The Master!"

The Master stopped pacing to stare at me. "How do you know this is a sonic screwdriver? And how do you know that's a TARDIS?"

Gritting my teeth, I answered, "It's on the show. The Doctor doesn't like weapons, so he uses a screwdriver. And the TARDIS has always been a police box."

Something changed in his expression. Something shifted in his eyes, like something was dawning on him.

"Why has it always been a police public call box?" His sounded like he was a professor giving me a pop quiz.

My eyebrows furrowed. What was he getting at? "It has a broken chameleon circuit. The TARDIS first landed in 1950s England, when police boxes were used. The Doctor never fixed it, or at least it would always break again when he tried to."

He walked closer to me. I tried to back away until I remembered I was still up against the damn tree. Seriously, why had I thought that was a good idea?

"How much do you know about my dimension?"

That's what he asked me. My mouth dried up. What if this is real? What if he's telling the truth? What if I'm actually talking to The Master? No. No-no-no-no-no-no. No. NO! It's not real. It's a TV show and this guy's nuts. Answer him as a distraction and try to back away.

"Well, I've watched every season out—at least twice. I've seen some more than that. I've researched, read the books, watched the movies—I'm not saying I know everything, but I know a good bit."
That seemed to be the perfect distraction. It put him in a thinking whirlwind—that's what I'll call it—because he was suddenly pacing furiously, muttering to himself, jerking at his long, dark hair, and, most importantly, not watching me.

Being as sneaky as possible, I inched right at an agonizingly slow pace and just when only my left shoulder was still touching the tree, The Master spun to face me.

"What's your name?" He took three steps toward me, right hand tightening around the sonic. "Dahlia."

He sneered. "You're **full** name, fool."

I bit back an irritated retort. I swear if this guy insulted me one more time I would punch him in the face. "Dahlia Fae Tombew."

"How is your surname spelt?"

What? Why would that be important? What's so special about—

"I don't have all bloody night, woman!" He shouted. 

*Okay. Best not to test the lunatic's patience.* 

"T-O-M-B-E-W." I spat out each letter, hoping to make them sting.

The Master's face lit up with malicious delight. A devious grin threatened to split his face in half as he locked eyes with me and swaggered a bit closer.

He stopped a yard away from me. "That's a funny way to spell a name. Don't you agree?"

Oh, so he wants to mock my name?

"If you're going to mock me at least be original. I've heard that one at least twelve times," I said, crossing my arms.

He snorted, "Please, if I were mocking you, if would take you a week to decipher my meaning."

I pressed my mouth into a thin line to stop myself from lashing out. I substituted rolling my eyes instead.

He tapped his jaw with the sonic, his expression turning playful. "Though, I must admit, I can't believe I didn't notice it before . . ." He trailed off, leaving me to try and decipher his thoughts.

I cocked my hip out. A silent dare for him to finish.

Lifting his chin high—to look down on me even more I expected—and smirking, The Master purred, "It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Bad Wolf."

My posture went slack. My mouth and throat turned to sandpaper.

"What?" I rasped.

He chuckled condescendingly. "Don't attempt to be coy. I've figured you out. You're Bad Wolf."

*Don't panic. Deny it. Maybe he'll listen. I'm not Bad Wolf!*
The amusement wouldn't have left faster if I'd insulted his mother. Fury contorted his handsome features into a frightening picture that shot dread straight through my core.

"Yes. You. Are." He was gritting his teeth, trying to control his rage.

*Or maybe he won't. Don't panic. Don't panic. Reason with him.*

"Look." I paused to swallow the saliva that suddenly flooded my mouth and repeated myself, "Look, I know you need to find Bad Wolf, but it's not me. I can promise you that. I'm just some southern teenaged girl who's in the wrong place. You have to listen to me. It's a mistake." I didn't care that I was practically begging. He had to understand. He *had* to!

"No!"

The shout had me back against the oak, stationary with fear.

"It's not a mistake!" He pointed the sonic at me threateningly. "Do you know what I had to do to get here? No, you don't! You don't know what The Doctor and I both sacrificed for this chance! This one chance! To get *one stupid ape!*"

He growled the last time inches from my face.

Short gasps of air went in and out of my lungs. I could barely breathe. I wondered if this was what a panic attack felt like.

The Master whirled away from me to furiously pace while he ranted.

"We worked and toiled over endless calculations! Created theories and then dismissed them as soon as they were created! All while our dimension ripped itself apart." He leaned against the TARDIS, digging his nails and forehead into the wood for a moment before spitting out, "Then we figured out what went wrong. An event that was supposed to happen didn't." he shoved off the TARDIS and stalked over to me. Leaning down to make eye contact, he sneered, "The fate of my entire dimension rests in the hands of one pathetic, little ape. Irony truly is humorous."

This was getting out of control. I needed to run. Now.

"Well, I'm sorry, but unless you can actually prove it, I'm not going to believe it."

That smirk was back full force. "Oh, but I can prove it. You see, the coordinates The Doctor and I ended up with were for this exact spot. So unless there's anyone else in that house who I haven't met yet," He paused and waited for me to refute his guess.

I stayed quiet.

"No?" the Master teased, chuckling, "Oh well."

He fiddled with the sonic again. It clicked twice and the light blinked on, nearly blinding me.

Hissing, I slammed my eyes shut reflexively.

"Apologies," The Master snickered cruelly but turned it down.

"Open your eyes. You'll want to see this."

I hesitantly opened my eyes. After rapidly blinking colorful spots out of my vision, I finally focused on The Master.
His smirk was a victorious grin again as he held the sonic screwdriver loosely. "This is irrefutable proof that you are Bad Wolf." He proceeded to write in the air.

Once he finished, my name—Dahlia F. Tombew—hovered in the air in glittering light.

*That doesn't prove anything.* I watched carefully while The Master shushed and gave a one word command.

"Watch."

With a flick of the sonic, my name rearranged itself.

My confused expression morphed into a wide eyed look of horror. I gaped at the seemingly innocent sentence my name had formed.

*I am the Bad Wolf* glowed bright blue in the near pitch black.

The Master waved the sentence away with another flick of the sonic. "There you have it—proof you're Bad Wolf. Any questions?"

"You, um, you left out two letters," I whispered in horror. I had no other response.

*Now you can panic.*

*This is bad. This is very bad. This is so bad it makes the Twilight books look like The Holy Grail of literature. It's time to leave. No more stalling. I can probably outrun him. He was coughing at lot earlier, so he might have bad lungs and I left the door—*

Hacking coughs broke me out of my thought.

The Master was doubled over, almost retching into his fist. He hissed and clutched his head while straightening.

"I've wasted too much time here," He scolded, then looked at me. "It's time to leave."

Oh God no.

Swallowing thickly, I stuttered, "A-again, I'm sorry but I c-can't help you."

Oh fuck. He was grinning again. That grin was definitely bad news for me. Every time I'd seen it, things went from bad to worse.

"Who said you had a choice?"

We stared each other down for several moments. Swallowing again, I weighed my options. Though, in reality, I had no other choice. Either I ran, giving myself a chance, or allowed myself to be kidnapped by a madman. I bolted.

Or attempted to. Apparently The Master wasn't impeded enough by his degraded health for me to outrun him. I had only gotten a few feet away when he tackled me and manhandled me back to the TARDIS.

When he drug me through the door, I confirmed it was busted, though busted was an understatement.

Splinters jabbed out in every direction. The lock was missing and so was the wood around it.
the door handle was barely hanging on by a thread.

"Let go of me, you fucking bastard!" I was screaming and howling at the top of my lungs. I thrashed and bucked and kicked any way I could but it was no use; The Master had an iron grip on my waist and wrists. Honestly, it was like he'd done this before!

Maybe he had.

"Rassilon! You apes just don't give up," He growled.

I snarled, kicked out and lunged sideways. That was a horrible idea. The Master used my momentum to slam me against the wrecked door, scraping my palms, wrists, forearms, and cheek.

He then heaved me inside and up the ramp before shoving me into the captain seat. He rushed around the console, pressing buttons, flipping switches, and slamming two levers down at rapid speed.

Seconds later I heard the grinding gears sound of the TARDIS taking off.

No.

I leaped from the seat and dashed to the door.

_The door's busted. All I have to do is run out._

And then I slammed into a very solid door.

_Ow. That registered first. Next was that I was muttering 'No-no-no-no-no-no-no-no-no-no' so fast I was impersonating a machine gun. But he broke the lock! And it's not even supposed to open outwards!_

"Piece of advice. Sit your arse down, woman!" The Master called sarcastically.

Like Hell I'll—

The TARDIS jerked sharply.

Still standing, I was slung to the metal floor. My head cracked against it and I saw the hemospectrum. Pain bloomed warmly at the back of my skull. I prayed hadn’t gotten a concussion.

_Hey, God? Yeah, I just wanted to tell you that you're an ass. 'Kay, thanks, bye, I thought crossly._

The Master barked out a laugh. "I told you so."

"Go fuck the Slitheen family you alien douchebag," I hissed with as much contempt I could muster.

He snorted and said something but was drowned out by the TARDIS screaming. The console exploded with huge bursts of sparks in three different places one after the other.

"Come on, come on!" The Master urged, "You can make it! If you can survive traveling with The Doctor for over nine hundred years, you can do this!"

Still dazed, I slowly go to my feet.

Only to be tossed into the railing a few seconds later when the TARDIS slammed to halt.
The Master shoved past me and opened the door. He beamed, "Cardiff, early 2000s. What're you waiting for? This is your new home! Don't you want to see it?"

I glared at him. Backing away and shaking my head, I flatly informed him, "No."

His face fell. He tilted his head in the silent question of 'Why not?' As if he hadn't just committed an atrocity.

Taking a deep breath to contain my rage, I started, "You come to my dimension, threatened me, insulted me and my race, and not only kidnapped me from my home, but you have also brought me to another dimension! Now you expect me to prance off into the streets of—not just a city I've never been to—a country I have never stepped foot in like some giddy little school girl on a field trip! You expect me to just do as I'm told when I've been taken from my family and everything I know!"

My knees finally gave out. I fell against the console and slid down to the floor. For a while, I just stared at the metal grating in shock; my thoughts too scrambled to even form a coherent sentence.

After I had gathered my wits, I glanced upwards. The Master stood in the door frame. His eyes had lost their malicious cheer and the burning hate they had sported for most of the time I had known him. He looked lost.

No, I thought. He doesn't deserve my pity.

"Take me home." I had meant for it to come out as a demanding order, but instead it was a hoarse plea. Not sure if The Master had heard me, I repeated it and each time I did, it got louder and louder until I was screaming those three words at him.

"It's impossible," The Master mumbled.

My temper flared again and this time, I wasn't going to shove it down. "I don't care how you do it, just do it!"

"It's impossible. The chances of returning to your dimension are in the negative trillions. The journey requires too much power. Even with a Type-100 TARDIS and a perfectly crafted wormhole, we wouldn't be able to get through. The only reason I made it was because I had The Doctor, and our dimension was dissolving. There's no way to go back," He rattled.

Defeated, I curled into the fetal position to cradle my forehead against my knees. Why did this have to happen?

The Master shuffled closer. He coughed and cleared his throat.

"I'm sorry."

I lifted my head just enough to look him in the eyes. He stared right back.

Snorting with dead laughter, I spat, "No, you're not."

He swallowed. "Yes, I am."

The Master quickly walked to the console. I flinched when he meandered too close, but the Master shuffled past me and continued down the hall.

Only a few minutes later, he was back. In one hand was a black leather backpack purse. The other
hand he held out to me.

My eyes flickered between The Master's hand and his eyes. He seemed sincere, but I didn't trust this guy as far as I could throw him. And that's, like, a few centimeters.

"Please," The Master begged.

Shakily, I took his hand and he pulled me up. I expected The Master to immediately drop my hand but he didn't. When I loosened my fingers, he clutched my hand tighter with his. I could feel him shaking. I let him clutch at my hand.

The Master led me outside the TARDIS but still didn't release me. Instead, he closed the door and leaned on it.

*But it's broken*, I thought irritably.

"I am sorry." He squeezed my hand. "I've taken you away from everyone and everything you love and brought you to a place you know nothing about. I'm ordering you to save a world you just gained knowledge of after insulting you. And now, in a few minutes, once the TARDIS and I vanish, I'm going to desert you in a strange place with absolutely no help."

He knocked his head against the TARDIS, staring at the sky before making eye contact.

"I'm sorry—for everything. For what you've already gone through and what you will go through because I brought you here. I'm sorry, but I just couldn't allow my universe to fall apart while I did nothing. Though I regret bringing you here, I can't take you back, even if I could cross over again."

The Master handed me the bag. I took it, not breaking eye contact. I tentatively released his hand to put it on. The master reluctantly allowed it.

I still had my purse. I had completely forgotten I had it until now. That was one good thing, at least.

The Master dug around in his pockets while he spoke, "That bag is Dimensionally Transcendental. I assume you know what that means."

I nodded,

"The TARDIS put it together, so I have no clue what's inside it."

Finally, he pulled out a huge roll of British pounds and handed it to me. "There's a hotel down the street that you can stay in for a while. I'm sure you're capable of figuring out anything else from there. This will also come in handy." Out came a USB-like device that he also handed over.

He reached into his pocket again, hesitantly this time. After several moments of contemplating, The Master slowly pulled out a short, thick snake chain. The chain was followed by a fob watch.

The Master sighed deeply before showing the watch to me. "Do you know what this is?"

I furrowed my eyebrows. A *fob watch? Why was that so familiar? It was used with something else.* . . . Yes!

"It's a fob watch used to hold the identity of a Time Lord when they use a Chameleon Arch to hide among another species," I rushed out in one breath.

The Master smiled, "I guess you know more than I thought. You're correct. This watch's true
power is lost on you because you're human, but I'm hoping it will give you luck."

I understood the bag, the USB, and the money, but he didn't have to give me the watch. I always
thought it was some sort of personal item and that a Time Lord just wouldn't hand it over to
random girls they kidnapped.

The Master was still holding it out to me. I realized he was waiting for me to take it.

Blushing bright red, I fumbled a few second trying to shove the money and USB into my purse. I
finally just ripped open a random pocket—nearly breaking the zipper—and crammed both inside.

The Master looked straight into my eyes, but it wasn't like the other times. It wasn't condescending
or regretful or all knowing. It was pleading for something. But what? What could I give him other
than my cooperation?

I was reaching for the watch when it dawned on me. Taking the watch meant I forgave him.

My hand froze inches from the dangling watch. Could I forgive him? Better yet—should I. He
kidnapped me, brought me to a different dimension, and had given me orders. He insulted me
countless times and now he says he's sorry and asks for forgiveness.

I'd zoned out with my thought so I focused back on The Master. I blinked in astonishment.

The Master just looked so pathetic. His confidence had deserted him. The dangerous and terrifying
man I was acquainted with was gone.

Being so used to watching The Master act like the worst creature in the entire universe, this
unfamiliar regeneration shocked me to my core. He seemed to feel so much more than any of the
ones I'd seen before. It was surreal.

Yes, he kidnapped me and I was still upset about that. Yes, he could've handled it better, but was it
really that wrong?

From what The Master mentioned, this dimension had been falling apart. The Doctor and him had
worked together relentlessly to find out why; and the why was that Bad Wolf never happened. So,
he used the TARDIS to cross into another dimension and find the one thing that could stabilize his
world. He needed to fix what was broken. The Master would've taken whoever he believed to be
Bad Wolf.

I was just the unlucky one.

The fob watch was heavy and cold in my palm.

Gently, I tugged it from The Master's grip. He swallowed thickly and released it before turning
away.

I traced the pads of my fingers over every groove and design on its surface, taking in its beauty.
Curiosity finally got the best of me. I opened it and was greeted by a moving clock face; a soft
ticking floated out.

I jerked when The Master cleared his throat. He was holding out a hand and still not looking at me.

"I believe it's time we part, Ms. Tombew," He paused to steady his hoarse, cracking voice. "I don't
have much time left and you need to get going."
My heart clenched in pity. He was going to die. The Master was going to die and he was trying to look brave. He didn't want me to notice that he was afraid.

After locking the fob watch to my belt loop and putting it in my pocket, I shook The Master's outstretched hand.

"Thank you for your help. I swear I'll do my best." I tried to smile reassuringly. I didn't think I succeeded.

The Mater smiled back just as weakly, "I know you will. And I'm sorry."

Our hand fell limp at our sides; our interaction finished. Neither of us moved, though.

I couldn't explain why I did what I did next.

I shuffle closed to The Master, leaned up, and kissed his cheek.

While pulling away, I noted his shocked—bordering on horrified—look. I winced and tried to stutter an excuse.

"I-I'm sorry! I don't know why I did that! You're about to die or something so you obviously don't want to be touched by an ape! I'm so sorry!"

Oh my fucking God! Why did I do that? Why? Do I have a death wish? I didn't think I did but I apparently—

My inner freak out/horrified rant would've continued if not for the hand threading itself through my hair and jerking me forward.

"Wha—" The Master's mouth silenced my question.

At first, I just froze. The Master didn't seem to care. He was a good kisser, I wouldn't deny that, but it wasn't like any kiss I had experienced before. It was rough, passionate, and slightly desperate. Oh, and dominating, couldn't forget that.

While one hand busied itself with twisting in my hair, the other clasped my jaw with almost bruising force. The Master twisted to deepen the kiss and to bite my bottom lip.

Should I kiss back? Should I just let him continue?

Around the time The Master attempted to shove his tongue in my mouth, he noticed I wasn't responding. He pulled away briefly, and then loosened both his grips before kissing me again.

This kiss was much softer, timid even. It was still desperate, but I didn't feel like he was trying to bite my lips off.

I kissed back—just a bit of pressure to assure him this was all right.

The Master asked for permission this time. Albeit, it was such a faint flick of his tongue I almost didn't feel it.

My lips parted just enough for his tongue to slip in.

The Master didn't immediately initiate a game of tonsil hockey. First, he mapped every tooth, every crevice; every slope as deliberately as possible, even going so far as to dip into the spot beneath my tongue. Only after what felt like eternity did he slide against my tongue.
I twisted mine around his and roughly sucked it into my mouth. I wanted some of that fierceness from the first kiss but The Master was being cautious and gentle. He was scared again and I wasn't having that.

Both arms were around his neck, jerking him closer so I could assault his mouth. At first The Master allowed me to dominate him. That changed when I pressed him against the TARDIS. He fought back (finally) until he forced me to submit to a slower kiss.

I broke away for air. Satisfaction flooded through me when I caught sight of the Master's flushed cheeks and heaving chest.

"Feel better?" I smiled devilishly.

He chuckled. "Yes, I do."

We broke apart so I could prop myself up to his right. Closing my eyes, I allowed myself to take in the silence.

"Thank you."

"No problem," I hummed. I paused before asking, "How long do you have?"

I felt him stiffen next to me. Maybe I should've been more subtle.

He cleared his throat. "Five, maybe ten minutes."

"You seem fine, though." I frowned, turning to look at him.

He barked out a bitter laugh. "The calm before the storm. How do I explain this to someone with very little understanding of traveling through dimensions?"

I sucked on my front teeth, "I find it helpful to just ramble and let the moron ask questions after."

The Master smirked. "Just for that I'll take back every stupid ape comment. Let's see if you can keep up, though.

"Time Lords used to travel between dimensions frequently, but with Gallifrey and the Time Lords gone—"

I interrupted, "I know that. Traveling between dimensions became impossible."

He raised an eyebrow.

"Sorry." I said, smiling sheepishly. "The Doctor went to another dimension by accident once."

He nodded. "It is impossible now. We had to run nearly two point four trillion numbers for we got the sequences that would allow us to cross dimensions on purpose," The Master explained further.

"One in a million chance?" I joked.

He ignored my poor attempt at lightening the mood and licked his lips. "When we finally succeeded, The Doctor was going to come with me but, before he could, a rip appeared." He looked up, silently asking if I needed more explanation.

I shook my head.
"It trapped him. He couldn't get to the TARDIS. I couldn't leave him, so I stayed. Tried to. The Doctor told me to. He said that if I waited for him, the chance was gone. I left. I ran. I managed to cross into your dimension but not without a price. In your world, we're on the telly. We don't exist there. Making something exist in a dimension it doesn't exist in is dangerous, not to mention illegal.

"When I did that, your dimension fought back. It started breaking me apart—atom by atom."

I winced. "Like white blood cells fighting an infection."

The Master snorted, "Yeah."

"That must hurt. If it's stopped hurting then it's entered the final stages, right?" I questioned.

He nodded. "Soon I'll fade from existence."

"There's nothing you can do? Nothing at all?" I knew it was hopeless; it showed in my tone, but it never hurt to ask.

The Master sighed tiredly, "No, this TARDIS and I are from a doomed timeline. Even if your dimension hadn't fought back, this one will still wipe us out of existence."

"Because with me here, you'll never exist," I deadpanned. "Dude, this is so fucking shitty. I can’t even begin to tell you how much this sucks."

"You have such an elegant way of putting things, Miss Tombew," The Master teased, his mouth curling into a slight grin.

Snickering, I replied, "That's me—picture of elegance. And call me Dahlia. Friends use their first names."

That seemed to strike a chord with him. He swallowed then cleared his throat.

"Do," He stumbled over the word before righting himself, "Do you know my name?"

I blinked. "Yes."

"Call me that," He muttered. "Please."

A small smile sneaked onto my face. "All right, Koschei it is."

The Master—Koschei—smiled. "It's been so long since anyone called me that."

We sat in silence again. I started humming a random song that I couldn't remember the name of.

"You should probably get going."

I tilted my head to show him I was listening.

"That hotel down the street has plenty of rooms open, I made sure. You need to go book a room and get some rest. You're going to need it," Koschei repeated, motioning to the opening of the alley.

I sucked on my teeth again before stretching noisily. A satisfied groan left me as I collapsed against the TARDIS again.
"Nah, I think I'll stay here a while longer," I dismissed his serious tone easily.

Koschei relaxed, reassured that I wasn't going to run off that easily. Licking his lips and smiling, he intertwined his fingers through mine and squeezed.

"Thank you," He whispered gratefully.

I smiled. "It's not like the hotel is going anywhere, and I don't have anywhere to be."

Sighing, I asked, "You know what the worst part of this clusterfuck is, Koschei?"

"Clusterfuck?" Koschei asked wryly.

I pouted, annoyed. "Please tell me you've kept up with human lingo enough to know what a clusterfuck is."

He laughed, "I believe I can deduce what a clusterfuck is, Dahlia."

Once again beaming, I continued, "Good because I'm crap at explaining things. If I try to explain it, it'll either be so dumbed down you'll be insulted or a jumble of nonsense even your Time Lord brain wouldn't understand."

"You were saying about the clusterfuck?" He prodded.

"Oh, yeah, sorry, got distracted. The worst part is that the first time you're not a complete asshole, you have to fade from existence," I whined.

"The universe is a bitch."

I burst out laughing and continued to do so until Koschei joined in and we were both gasping for breath.

After we were out of breath, wheezing, and wiping tears off our faces, I giggled out, "Dear God, only met you a few minutes ago and I've already corrupted you. I should probably be ashamed."

"You should, you horrible, despicable human," Koschei snickered.

In the most serious voice I could muster, I said, "I have no shame."

He gave me an expression that could only be summed up with the words No Shit. I giggled and continued humming my song. It kept the silence from being completely overwhelming.

I tried to appear as at ease as possible for Koschei’s benefit, but in the back of my mind, I couldn’t stop counting. He said around five or ten minutes; at least five had passed already, possibly more. It should start any minute now.

Even if this was inevitable, my heart still sputtered with anxious adrenaline. In an attempt to calm myself, I began tapping against the TARDIS. It was a nonsense beat. It meant absolutely nothing.

Koschei’s hand suddenly clenched mine; his grip was almost painful. I looked up at him in surprise, but he refused to meet my eyes.

“Koschei?” I murmured.

His hand tightened again. Mine did as well, though I didn't understand why.
The fingers of my right hand continued to tap out the steady beat.

It wasn’t until Koschei stared down at my hand that I realized why he was so upset.

One-two-three-four

One-two-three-four

One-two-three-four

I was tapping out the beat of the drums unknowingly. Immediately, I stopped, slapping my hand palm-down on the worn wood of the TARDIS to cease the itching beneath my skin. My gut lurched fearfully. I swore I heard the drums, if only for a moment, but it was just my pounding heart.

I opened my mouth to apologize, but Koschei spoke first. “It’s time.”

Nodding sadly, I gave the Time Lord a tight hug. He returned it briefly before releasing me to gather my things.

Leaving someone to die wasn’t easy. Though this wasn’t someone I could prevent, I still felt an overwhelming amount of guilt at leaving. Even if the person I was leaving was my kidnapper who I used to refer to as The Master. But he was Koschei now, and I had forgiven him during our extremely brief friendship. I was allowed to mourn the loss of a friend.

One-two. Three-four.

I squeezed my eyes shut and sucked in a nervous breath when I began tapping the rhythm against my thigh. I shoved away the fear as I got to the mouth of the alley. Be brave. Show no fear in the face of death or nonexistence.

I turned around. Koschei was standing in the doorway of the TARDIS. He didn't say anything, nor did he move toward me. We locked eyes and the entire world froze.

One. Two. Three. Four.

Koschei entered the TARDIS and closed the door.

My feet were planted in the ground. I couldn't move. I didn't want to.

The police box flickered in and out of sight quickly—like I'd blinked but I made sure to keep my eyes wide open. It flickered again but slower this time. And again and again. Slower each time.

One . . . Two . . . Three . . . Four . . .

I turned on my heel and left the alley.

Funny thing was, as I walked down that dirty Cardiff street on an unknown date, I realized that in those last few moments of The Master's life—I had truly heard the drums.
"Could you tell me what the date is?" I asked the desk clerk.

She stared at me.

I must’ve made some picture: a roughed up, teenaged, American girl with only two bags paying for a room with a wad of cash. So, I had either been kidnapped, gotten really drunk the other night, or I was a criminal of some sort.

"March second." She frowned worriedly. "Are you okay, miss? Do I need to call someone?"

God, this was going to sound horrible.

"What year?"

She looked taken aback, so taken aback that she paused in handing me my room key.

"2004. Miss, I can call someone. They can be here in a few minutes." Her free hand twitched toward the phone on her desk.

I took the key card and smiled reassuringly. "Thank you, but it's been taken care of." Then I calmly left the lobby to find my room.

_I've seen worse_, I thought, regarding the room with little interest. It was a plain room in pastel colors with a twin bed and a connecting bathroom. Nothing special. Instead, my attention was directed at every aching part of my body; especially my burning and stinging arm.

I didn't want to do inventory. I didn't want to look at my wounds. With all the adrenaline gone, all I wanted to do was sleep, but I knew I couldn't. Least I could do was take a shower.

Shucking my clothes off as carefully as I could, I made my way to the bathroom. Before stepping under the water, I checked my arm.

There wasn't any blood, but there would be once I removed all the splinters. Deep blue flecked up and down my forearm and hand. Most weren't that large; two or three, though, seemed about half an inch long. I managed to remove those with my nails.

A soft moan escaped when I stepped under the scalding water. Tension leaked out easily, but attempting to wash my hair brought it back. Several minutes and a wad of hair later, I was back to scrubbing and relaxing under the spray. Forty-five minutes in, I managed to drag myself out.

It dawned on me that I didn't have a change of clothes.

_Fuck it, not like I haven't slept naked before._

Sleepy from the warm water, I stumbled to the bed and flopped on it. Any invigoration the shower had created disappeared as exhaustion set in once more. I wiggled weakly to get under the sheets. Seconds after shutting my eyes I was asleep.

I woke up eleven hours later.

Even though I was awake, I couldn't actually move without searing pain shooting through me until an hour later.
At 4:27pm, I sat lotus style on the bed, still completely naked, to take inventory. Opening my purse, I dumped all the contents in front of me, making sure to empty every pocket. One slim, brightly colored box caught my attention.

I blinked in astonishment.

*Of all the things...* A smile slowly spread across my face. Giggles welled up in my chest before bursting from my mouth.

The box of gushers rested amongst gum and candy wrappers, a bag of watermelon jolly ranchers, my MP3, a tube of lip gloss (also watermelon flavored), a few pens, and a book.

*I guess I was in such a rush that I just shoved it in,* I noted when my giggles had died down. The smile stayed in place.

A search of my wallet produced thirty-seven dollars and eighty-four cents. Added with the money Koschei gave me, I had seven hundred twenty-four quid, with some change. It was a good bit of money to start off with but it wouldn't last long. Getting money was definitely at the top of the priority list.

I opened the bag the TARDIS put together and reached in. My fingers touched cloth and, confused, I pulled it out. A shirt? It was white T-shirt with short, block sleeves and made from a soft but sturdy material.

Setting the shirt aside, I reached in again to pull out a pair of comfortable-feeling jeans in my size, underwear, and a bra.

"Thank you, TARDIS." My grin faltered when a thought crossed my mind. "Although, it’s pretty creepy that she knew my sizes," I muttered, glancing at the tag on the bra—36C, exactly right.

The thought of getting dressed crossed my mind.

And was then crushed and the little pieces shoved off a cliff. The lazy part of me expressed its opinion that I could always get dressed later. It wasn’t like I was expecting company for Christ’s sake.

Some more rummaging produced a banana, a tooth brush, toothpaste, three bottles of water, a pill bottle with odd little medication, a cell phone, a laptop, its charger, fifteen different hair bands, a medical kit, and a bag of Granny Smith apples with a curious little note that read: Use wisely.

My arm was now buried up to my shoulder as I dug around. A slim tube drifted to my hand.

"Let's see what you are," I mumbled, retracting my arm. Blinking, I stared blankly at the object I now held.

I had pulled out a sonic screwdriver.

It looked just like the one the ninth and tenth Doctors used: slim and shiny silver with a blue light at the end.


Biting my lip, I couldn't resist the temptation. I clenched the sonic in one hand and directed it at the chair in the far corner. Nothing happened for several long moments, but then a stinging pain erupted from my index finger.
Dropping the sonic with a shocked cry, I brought the injured appendage close to examine it. A small drop of blood had welled up.

"What the fuck?"

I glared at the screwdriver. A needle stuck out from where my finger had just been.

Cautiously, I picked it up to get a better look at the needle. It disappeared back into the sonic and reappeared in another spot, succeeding in stabbing me for a second time and getting more blood. The needle retracted again while I dropped the—apparently—hostile device. Again.

"Fuck you, too," I grumbled.

The needle hadn't gone too far in, just enough to draw a few drops of blood from each puncture.

It reminded me I needed to inspect my wounds from the night before,

*I'll do it in a few minutes*, I mentally promised.

I hesitantly reached in the bag. Something practically slammed into my hand this time. Whatever it was felt like a larger version of a sonic screwdriver, but I doubted the TARDIS gave me two. Even with my doubt, I readjusted my grip to two fingers and slid the object into the open. What came out was both shocking and unsurprising.

*Why would the TARDIS give me this? Would I need to use it? Did she think I'd use it? Or did she just want me to be prepared for everything?*

The laser screwdriver dangled menacingly in my loose grip.

Sighing, I muttered, "I'll just put you over here for now," and went to place it next to the sonic.

Sharp pain signaled I'd been stabbed another time.

Hissing out as many curses as possible, I let the laser fall to the bed. It clattered noisily against the sonic.

Thinking bitterly that I should've seen that coming, I re-examined my finger. There wasn't a third drop of blood, but one was now larger than the other. The laser's needle had gotten me in the exact same place as the first one. That puncture burned twice as badly than earlier.

"Note to self: Sonic and laser screwdrivers bite." My tone was sour, punctuated by the scowl on my face.

I didn't want to continue my search through the bag. Who would after being stabbed three times by two different objects from it? Unfortunately, I had to make sure I knew all my resources.

When I grabbed the bag this time, I didn't plunge my arm in. Instead, I turned it upside down and shook it.

Nothing came out so I shook it harder.

Finally, an index card sized piece of paper fluttered out. It was shortly followed by what looked like a key.

"Okay, so a piece of paper and a key," I mused. "Why would the TARDIS give me a piece of paper and a key?"
Picking up the paper, I turned it over in my hands. There was nothing written on it. It was just a blank scrap of paper.

I started muttering to myself. "Paper . . . paper . . . special paper? Maybe. What kind of special—"

I grinned when it dawned on me. "Of course! Psychic paper! She gave me psychic paper! That'll definitely come in handy."

Psychic paper now moved to the side, I picked up the key and examined it.

It was a spade key and it strongly resembled the ones used by the Third, Fourth, Seventh, and Eighth Doctors.

No, wait. I frowned and flipped the key over continually, making sure to scrutinize it from all possible angles.

It was the exact same key! I had a key to the TARDIS! Euphoria swept through me. This was even better than the sonic screwdriver! An actual key to the TARDIS! She trusted me enough to give me a key!

"And aren't you gorgeous," I complimented, watching the silver object twinkle in the light.

Apparently, those are the words to initiate contact with the TARDIS, because the key glowed hotly. I yelped in surprised and pain. Immediately I dropped the key.

I wrinkled my nose in distaste. "What is with all the stabbing and singeing? Are Time Lords masochists?"

The first aid kit made even more sense.

Snorting, I muttered, pulling the kit toward me, "At least she thought ahead."

One hour later, I was property bandaged, sanitized, de-splintered, and dressed. After my final count—something that took much longer than I had anticipated—I had seven bruises of differentiating sizes and colors, five scrapes, all of which were on the same arm, a goose egg on the back of my head, and two punctures on my right index finger. I had actually suspected the damage would be a lot worse. Koschei had given me a bit of a beating before getting friendly.

While I packed my belongings, I listed my top priorities:

Money was definitely at top of the priority list. The large roll of quid Koschei gave me wouldn't last long, even if I knew how to be frugal.

Shelter came second. I couldn't just stay in this hotel for a year. That decision would end up being both suspicious and expensive.

After shelter came food and water. Altogether I had three water bottles I could continually refill, a box of gushers, a banana, a bag of apples, and a bottle of nutrients pills that would, apparently, sustain me like a three course meal would. I still wasn't sure if those were safe for human consumption.

Then, I needed a cover story. I couldn't just walk around Cardiff without some explanation. The woman at the front desk already thought I had been kidnapped. And I wouldn't be able to get a job without information, either. How was I going to accomplish that anyway? I didn't have the equipment or knowledge to counterfeit the necessary papers.
No, I reprimanded. *One step at a time. I'll worry about that when I get to it.*

All that left was finding The Doctor. It was 2004 now. It would at least be a few months before he showed up for the Nestene Consciousness.

How do I get him to take me with him?

Now that was a good question. What did all the other companions do to grab the Doctor's attention?

"They showed him they were brilliant," I mumbled. A smirk slowly split my mouth.

"I think I can handle that."

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Turns out I didn't need to worry about much. The TARDIS had thought of everything.

On a whim, I had pointed the sonic screwdriver, after making sure I wouldn't get stabbed again, at an ATM. Bills had flown out of the machine at rapid fire speed. Soon a huge pile had formed on the ground. Alas, there was a police officer around at the time, so I couldn't grab any of the money. Next time I tried, I was extra careful.

I also didn't have to worry about a cover story or information. The USB Koschei had given me contained everything I would need.

Two weeks in and I had more than enough money, a good sized flat, a cover story, and a pending job at Henrik's.

With the weight of my checklist off my mind, I did some research.

I found out I didn't exist in this world. My parents were together; my older sister existed and so did my younger brother, but I didn't. I hadn't been born. Dahlia Fae Tombew didn't exist.

*I wonder if this is how Rose felt in that alternate universe.*

Rose did exist. At one point in time. Nineteen years ago twin girls were born to Pete and Jackie Tyler. Ashley and Rose Tyler were their names. Unfortunately, there were complications. Rose Tyler died two years after birth.

I hadn't been expecting that.

Actually, I hadn't known what to expect, but that wasn't it. Maybe she'd never been born or wasn't as brave as she was in the show but not *that*. Rose had been alive. A problematic birth killed her before she grew up; before she met The Doctor; before Bad Wolf or Canary Wharf.

Even though I wasn't Rose's biggest fan, I never would've wanted that to happen to her.

Several questions had been answered, but others formed.

Why had Rose died? Was it because this time she'd had a twin? What was Ashley like? Would she be anything like Rose?

Quickly, I decided Ashley would be nothing like Rose; if she was then I wouldn't be needed. Ashley would've simply taken Rose's place with The Doctor.
I prayed she wasn't like her mother.

The telephone made a soft clack when I set it back in its cradle.

Henrik's manager had called to tell me I had gotten the job and I started tomorrow.

I plopped down on the couch and sighed roughly. This was it. I had done everything I could do to prepare for The Doctor. Now all I had to do was wait.

An annoyed huff rose from my chest. I pouted and glared sourly at the television.

I hated waiting.
Several months had passed since I'd first appeared in this dimension. I'd effortlessly fit in with the people around me and no one questioned me whenever I would peek around corners or stare at the sky for extended periods of time. I simply told them that birds in America were more violent than the ones in England, and just like that, my shifty behavior was accepted as an American oddity.

It should probably be worrisome how accepting everyone was of my excuse.

"Hey." Someone waved a hand in front of my face. "Hey, Dahlia. Dahlia!"

I snapped out of my daze, blinking.

Ashley tilted her head and stared at me. "Are you okay? You kind of zoned out there."

"It's called thinking, Ashley, you should try it some time," I scoffed.

I moved to another shelf and continued to fold shirts.

She snorted and smiled. "I would, but you do enough thinking for the both of us."

And then some. I rolled my eyes.

Ashley wasn't like Rose in a few ways. She was stubborn, nosy, flirtatious, and liked to overreact, but that was where the similarities stopped. Ashley wasn't brave or a quick thinker. She liked living in a box. Everything could be explained in some rational way; there were no such things as aliens or time travel. She got freaked out easily. I was actually surprised she became my friend since many of my interests danced outside her box.

Ashley also didn't look exactly like Rose. Her lips were thinner; her face wasn't as round; her eyes lighter in color. Her hair was blonder and shorter; it ended in a perfectly straight bob at her chin with her bangs slightly curled above her brow. Ashley was taller, about 5'9", and less curvy than Rose. She also had a habit of always wearing something Hello Kitty. Today was a bright pink headband with a bedazzled Hello Kitty face on its left side.

"Oh thank God, I'm ready to go home!" Ashley's lighter, more airy voice broke my muse.

I turned to her. "What?"

She gave me an annoyed look. "Five minutes until closing. They just said it over the speakers. Didn't you hear?"

With a cheeky smile, I replied, "Sorry, I was thinking again."

She smacked my arm, telling me to shut up.

Not to mention that innocent air she has about her, even though I know she isn't.

I slung my bag over my shoulder. It was the same bag Koschei had given me. I rarely, if ever, let it leave my person. Never knew when I'd need something from it.

When we got to the door, we were stopped by the security guard. He waved the bag of lottery money in Ashley's face.
She rolled her and snatched it.

*If she's that annoyed by it then she should've just let me deliver it in the first place,* I grumbled to myself.

Ashley had been chosen to deliver the money and I, being the awesome friend that I was, had offered to do it for her. She had politely declined my offer even though she complained about it nonstop for weeks afterward.

Sighing dramatically, I stepped away from the door, turned on my heel, and started walking with her.

"What're you doing?" Ashley asked, exchanging her pouting look for one of confusion.

"I'm going with you, because if I don't, you'll whine about having to go down the creepy basement by yourself to Mickey and then I'll have to listen to Mickey bitch at me about letting you go alone."

She snorted. "I'm not a kid, Dahlia. I can go deliver some lottery money by myself."

"Oh please, you have the mentality of a five year old," I snickered.

She smacked me again. "Shut up and go home, you witch."

I laughed and turned back towards the entrance, calling over my shoulder, "Call me later!"

Ashley smiled and waved.

Passing the security guard to leave, I told him, "Oh yeah, the manager told me to tell you to get everyone else out of the store and leave early."

He raised an eyebrow, skeptical. "Really?"

I rolled my neck and continued, "Yeah, he has to go somewhere today and needs everyone to go home. Wilson's locking up today."

The suspicious look he stared me down with told me to try harder.

With a final shrug, I said, "If you don't believe me, you could always go ask him yourself. Though I don't think he'd be too happy."

The guard mulled this information over while I just stood there inspecting my nails as casually as I could and praying to God this guy bought my lie.

Finally, he nodded. "All right, I'll tell everyone. Thanks for telling me."

I beamed. "No problem! See ya tomorrow!"

I skipped out the door and down the street.

Only a few blocks away, I ran into somebody. I could say it wasn't my fault, but it totally was. I hadn't been paying attention, too jittery about this being the day to care about what was going on around me.

The two of us collapsed on the ground with me on top in a tangle of limbs.

"I am so sorry! That was completely my fault! I wasn't looking where I was going!" I continued to
apologize while I clamored off the man.

He laughed, "Don't worry about it. No harm done."

As I helped him up, I saw what he looked like. Every inch of me froze.

"Something wrong?" he asked, that huge grin threatening to split his face in half.

I couldn't help but smile, too. The Doctor's smiles always were infectious. I shook myself out of my stupor.

"No, sorry, thought you were someone else," I excused. I couldn't reveal who I was yet. Explaining would take time he didn't have right now. Speaking of . . .

Smiling sheepishly, I released his hand and, rocking back on my heels, said, "I should let you get going. You probably have more important things to do than stand here talking to me."

The Doctor's eyes became unfocused for a few seconds while he thought. Then it seemed to dawn on him where he was supposed to be right now. "You're right! I do. Thanks for reminding me!"

I smirked and raised an eyebrow. Rude. Rude and not ginger. Or perhaps just oblivious.

He moved around me, still grinning madly. Before he got too far away, I called out to him. "It was a pleasure meeting you!"

The Doctor turned around and waved. As soon as he wasn't facing me anymore, I took off, checking alleys as I went.

Three alleys down, I found it.

The TARDIS stood at the end of the alley, unassuming and bluer than I remembered. Smiling brightly, I dashed toward her. I skipped to a stop just in front of the doors and was suddenly gripped by nerves. What would I say to her? Would the key work? Would she let me in? Would she like me?

I never noticed it before but most of my inner monologues consist of questions. I should stop that.

Only one way to answer those questions.

Gripping the chain around my neck tightly and pulling it off my neck, I revealed the spade key. The fingers of my left hand stroked the blue wood while my right clutched the key.

"Hello, you might not know me, but we've met before. Technically it would've been your future," I explained. "That was a doomed timeline though. Not to seem obnoxious or anything, but since I was brought here to keep the universe from collapsing, that time line became inadequate and disappeared." I brandished the key for her to see. "You gave me a key. Although, I don't understand why you gave me a Spade key. The Doctor switched back to Yale keys sometime in his Eighth regeneration. I'll admit that I prefer the Spade design over the Yale. It's much prettier."

My gaze drifted from the key to the lock. "Do you mind?"

I uncovered the lock and paused, taking a deep breath, before sliding the key in and turning. The sound of clanging tumblers and cogs was music ending in a click.

Or it would have if the door hadn't just swung open on its own.
Well then, that answers at least one question, I thought joyously.

The inside of the TARDIS was now revealed to me.

All of time seemed to stop. I couldn't speak. I couldn't think. I swear I stopped breathing momentarily. I'd never seen anything so beautiful in my entire life. This was much better than anything I'd seen on TV.

Gliding up the ramp, I gaped in wonder at everything. When I first thought of meeting The Doctor and stepping foot inside the TARDIS again, I had thought it would be anticlimactic. Everyone on Doctor Who made it out to be some magnificent event. I thought they were overreacting, but now I knew they weren't. Just standing here in the console room, with the TARDIS humming welcomingly around me, it stole my breath away.

Soon, my wonder was replaced with giddiness. I stroked the console, caressing every button and lever with more affection than I thought I possessed.

The irony didn’t escape me. I snorted. "The first time I was here I didn't get to marvel at how utterly fantastic you are. Of course, I had just been kidnapped. I guess that's a valid excuse. Either way, I apologize." I smacked my forehead. "Damn, I'm being rude. I practically invited myself in, and I haven't even introduced myself," I said. Turning to the large column above the console, I made up for my rudeness. "My name is Dahlia Tombew, and it's a pleasure to meet you, Miss TARDIS."

She hummed louder. Happiness and amusement tickled the back of my mind.

Smiling, I responded, "I'm glad you find me amusing."

Circling the console led me to another idea. "Would it be too much trouble to ask if you could warn me when a blonde woman, taller than me, with a Hello Kitty headband runs past this alley?" I dug out a picture of Ashley and me from my bag, "She looks like this."

A screen to my right flickered on. The street outside came into view. People mulled on the street, unaware of the beautiful blue box.

"Thank you."

The TARDIS hummed a question at me: Why?

"The Doctor's going to blow up Henrik's soon. After he does that, he'll come back here. I need to be gone before then. Ashley will run past here seconds after the explosion. She'll be my cue to leave," I explained.

I moved back to the captain's chair and sat down. Shifting into a lotus style sitting position, I thought out loud, "I guess I should also explain how I know that."

The TARDIS buzzed in acknowledgment.

I took a deep breath and tried to find the best place to start. She nudged my mind gently, as if saying to start at the beginning.

"That's so cheesy but all right. I'll try." I calmed my giggles and began my story.

Several minutes later, I had finished and was waiting for the TARDIS' version of a reply.
A comforting veil fell over my mind—like a warm hug—which was immediately followed by acceptance, curiosity, empathy, and even respect. She knew what it was like to be cut off from her home.

I smiled and thanked her. I looked back at the monitor—no sign of Ashley. How long did this part take? I didn't remember Rose's and The Doctor's first interaction taking this long. Of course, this was real life and not a TV show. Things could go differently. I suppose I would just waste a bit of time.

"I've always wanted to know some things," I said, stretching out lengthwise on the seat. "Mind if I ask a few questions?"

The entire room buzzed giddily; the cylinder in the center glowed brightly.

I giggled at the childish glee infecting my mind. The TARDIS seemed to enjoy having someone to talk to. Well, someone to talk to her.

In only a few minutes, I'd learned a lot about the TARDIS: She could communicate in a multitude of ways with The Doctor and other beings with telepathic abilities but not with words. Her doors could be remotely opened but only if she allowed it. Nearly a thousand rooms could populate the TARDIS at once, including a tennis courts, bio lab, theatre, eight different gardens, a labyrinth made entirely out of lime Jell-O, a dojo, an anti-gravity room, an aquarium, and even a life-sized chess set. And that was only the stuff I remembered!

That's another thing I learned. The TARDIS could only communicate with me and others like me by feelings and, sometimes, pictures—if their mind was open enough. That's how she'd shown me all those rooms. Pictures had flashed through my mind at rapid fire pace; they showed me hundreds of scenes, but I had only managed to remember a few.

I was just about to ask how long ago the Time War was when a mauve light flashed. I looked at the screen from earlier. It had split in two. One side showed Ashley running towards us; the other, Henrik's. It hadn't exploded yet, but I needed to leave.

Rushing to the door, I found it locked.

"TARDIS, I need to leave," I gasped frantically.

A shiver of sadness slipped down my spine, quickly accompanied by loneliness.

I smiled sadly and stroked the door. She was afraid I wasn't coming back. "I'll be back. It'll be tomorrow for me but could be only a few minutes for you. I promise this isn't the last time we'll see each other."

I waited. The door clicked open with a soft sigh of defeat.

Smiling once more in reassurance, I rushed out but quickly ran back in.

"Tomorrow, when you park in front of Powell Estate, The Doctor will go off, do his thing, and come back with me and Ashley. When The Doctor tries to get you to take off again, can you stall? Just for a minute or two. I'll come in then," I requested.

She hummed another yes out.

"Thank you, see you tomorrow!" I beamed and closed the door.
I turned around and cautiously made my way to the mouth of the alley. Ashley hadn't gone by yet; I needed to be careful or she would see me.

Suddenly, a blonde blur ran by. Henrik's exploded. A few seconds passed before I took a chance and peeked around both corners. Ashley was gone, and The Doctor hadn't shown up yet. Perfect time to make my getaway.

That made me sound like a cheesy super villain. I snickered at the thought and walked down the street as calmly as I could, desperately trying to contain my euphoria.

People were staring at me. Probably because of the huge grin I couldn't wipe off my face, and I kept breaking out in giggles. That was brought to a halt, though, when my phone rang.

My ringtone and caller ID both blare out who the culprit was. Ashley. I needed to act like I had no clue what had happened. If I hadn't stopped to chat with the TARDIS, I would just be getting back to my flat. I would have no knowledge of Henrik's sudden demise.

Taking a deep breath to collect myself, I answered.

"Hello?" Perfect. No wavering or stuttering, perfectly normal.

"Oh, my God, Dahlia!" Ashley sobbed.

Shit—she was crying. I outwardly winced. I didn't know how to deal with crying people, let alone an over the top crier like Ashley.

"Ashley? What's wrong? What happened? Are you all right?" I barked out the questions, hoping to be as convincing as possible. I apparently was, but I probably had her panic to thank more than my acting skills.

Ashley sputtered out a few more words before settling on crying.

Desperate to at least try and be a good friend, I attempted to comfort her. "Shh, sshhh, Ashley, Ashley, you need to talk deep breaths. That's right. In. Out. In. Out. I'll be over in just a minute. We'll make tea, watch bad TV, and you can tell me everything. Panicking won't do anything but give you wrinkles."

The last bit really snapped her out of it. There was one thing Ashley truly despised: wrinkles.

"O-okay," she whispered hoarsely.

"I'll be there soon," I said softly. I ended the call and started running.

I arrived at Powell Estate in record time. I wasn't even out of breath. Apparently, the running I had done over the last few months helped.

Stopping in front of the Tyler flat, I leaned on the door and gasped for breath. Flat ground? Easy. Stairs? Torture implements.

*I believe I have discovered the perfect alien deterrent,* I thought wearily. *Defeat by exhaustion.*

"Levitation, flying, and machinery not allowed," I said.
I knocked on the door. It swung open to reveal Jackie Tyler. Opening my mouth to greet her, I was cut off by Jackie shrieking.

"Oh, my God! Dahlia!" she gripped my arm and jerked me into a bone crushing hug. "It's just awful. Ashley was almost blown up! Barely made it out before Henrik's was leveled."

Another strangled voice called from deeper on the home: "Mum, let her inside! And don't kill her! She promised tea and bad telly!"

Wriggling out of Jackie's grip, I smiled sheepishly, "I'd better go tend to the trauma victim."

Finding Ashley was easy. She was exactly where I thought she'd be—curled up on the couch, wrapped in a blanket, and holding a box of tissues. Her eyes were puffy, red, and watery from crying. Piles of used tissues littered the couch and floor around her.

*Is that still her first box?* I wondered, sweeping a glance around. Nope, there was the first one, crumpled and discarded in the waste basket.

Even though I was supposed to be playing the part of the distressed friend, I couldn't help but grin at Ashley's over the top reaction. It never failed to put me in a better mood.

My grin faded however, when I saw her face.

"Ashley?" My hoarse whisper carried farther than I thought it would.

Ashley turned and gave me a watery smile. "Hey, Dahlia."

Poor thing. She was trying to hold herself together like I'd told her, but it wasn't natural for her to bottle up or hide her emotions like me. Definitely an impressive feat from her.

I let my pity show and crossed the room to sit next to her. Wrapping my arm around her shoulders, I cradled my friend to my side.

"Oh Ashley . . ."

She burst out in sobs, throwing her arms around my neck.

Fighting and winning over my awkwardness, I rubbed soothing circles on her back, letting her cry to her heart's content.

Nearly ten minutes of tears led to Ashley finally being calm enough to recall what happened. I listened intently, only pausing her to make a shocked comment, question some horrid detail, or retrieve each of us a cup of tea.

Jackie had also added her own comments. Mostly they consisted of "My poor dear" or "That's horrible" or "You should sue for compensation!" There was lots of that last one.

"Mum . . ." Ashley warned.

"I'm telling you! You need to get compensation!"

"Mum . . ." Ashley repeated.

"I'm right, though! Dahlia, tell her I'm right. I know I'm right." Jackie turned to me, eyes fierce.

I held up my hands defensively. I was not getting in the middle of this.
"Mum!" Ashley snapped. "We'll talk about that later. Right now, I'm tired."

Jackie frowned and started to speak again, but she was cut off by the phone ringing. She huffed and rushed to answer it.

"Lisa, you saw it, too? I know. It's such a horrible thing. Ashley barely got out alive!" There was a pause. Jackie started up again, her tone exasperated, "I know! I keep telling her, but she won't listen to me!" Jackie poked her head back in the living room. "Even Lisa agrees with me. You need compensation."

Ashley rolled her eyes. I attempted to hold in my snicker but failed; both Tyler women glared at me. The elder woman huffed again and retreated into the kitchen, still babbling about compensation.

Right when I moved to refill our cups, Ashley spoke up.

"Dahlia, do you think . . . That man . . ." she faltered quietly.

I sat back in my seat. "What man?"

She inhaled deeply, and then exhaled. "The one who told me to run in Henrik's. Do you think—do you think he's okay?" Ashley's eyes were downcast while she pondered her own question.

A small smile broke my steeled lips. Another wonderful thing about Ashley: She could care about someone she had literally just met. It reminded me of The Doctor, now that I thought about it.

"Well," I drawled out the word, "I don't know about you, but I think he's fine."

She looked at me, obviously skeptical. "How can you be so sure? The building bloody exploded, Dahlia!"

I smirked. "Yeah, it did, but he's the one who made it explode in the first place. You said it yourself—he talked like he knew what was going on. The man obviously had a plan."

Ashley smiled back, giggling. "You're right. Do you think he was sane, though? He saved my life, yeah, but—"

I just raised an eyebrow. "Ashley, the man was obviously nuttier than a can of peanuts. He told you those dummies were living plastic, and he had a bomb."

Just as I was about to spill out several colorful metaphors about how insane The Doctor was, the front door slammed open and then shut. Mickey rushed in. He was obviously in panic mode. He practically collapsed at Ashley's right side.

"There you are! I've been phoning you! You could've been killed, and I wouldn't have known!" Mickey exclaimed. He ignored me like he usually did. Wasn't his fault; that was what happened when you made one too many snarky comments. You tend to offend a person every now and then.

"I'm fine, Mickey, just had a bit of a shock," Ashley attempted to reassure her boyfriend.

"Fine? Look at all these tissues!" He peered inside her cup. "What're you drinking? Tea? No-no-no. That's not good." He removed the cup from her grasp and placed it on the table. "You need something stronger. Me, you, and," Mickey finally addressed me, "Dahlia can grab a pint at the pub. Help take the edge off that shock."
Ashley and I both gave him knowing looks.

"There's a match on, isn't there?" Ashley guessed, smirking.

Mickey managed to sputter out a defense: "Wha— . . . No! I'm just worried about you, is all. You said yourself you'd had a shock!"

"Knew it," I muttered victoriously.

Mickey shot me a dirty look. I merely snickered and stuck my tongue out at him. He turned back to Ashley and pleaded, "We could catch the last ten minutes."

She smiled. "You go, really, I don't mind. Dahlia and I have a date with some bad telly anyway."

He frowned. "You sure?"

"Yes! Now go watch your match, you stupid bloke. And get rid of that thing," Ashley ordered, smacking him with the plastic arm before handing it over.

Mickey grinned back and kissed her, muttering a goodbye.

I fake gagged—more in annoyance than disgust. Ashley and Mickey could be a disgustingly cheesy couple, and it tended to grate on my nerves.

"Bye Ricky!" I called after him as he left while he pretended to choke himself with the arm. The only reply I got was the slamming of the door.

Ashley pouted. "Why are you so mean to him?"

Smirking, I reclined back and reached for the remote. "Because it's just too damn easy," I replied, switching on the TV. "Now, I believe we have some crappy TV with our names written on it."

Ashley's alarm blared in my ears; I jolted off the air mattress and onto the floor. Falling a few inches shouldn't hurt as much as it did. Ashley and I groaned simultaneously: Hers was from annoyance; mine from pain. She peered down from the bed at me.

"What're you doing on the floor?" she asked groggily.

My "reply" (which consisted of muffled curses) was drowned out by Jackie shouting: "No use getting up, girls. You don't have a job to go to."

"There's Finch's, you could try it there," Jackie suggested when we were all sitting at the dining table. "They've always got jobs . . ."

I tuned Jackie out. She'd been going on about jobs and compensation all morning. Ashley was following my example and only making enough acknowledging noises to keep Jackie happy. For now. From her annoyed look, I could tell Ashley was close to snapping at her mom. That wouldn't end well for anyone.

Ashley's huff of irritation broke my self-induced numb state.

"Mum, I told you to nail down the cat flap!" Ashley called out. "We're gonna get strays!"
"I did it a few weeks ago!" Jackie shouted back.

"You only thought you did," Ashley replied, glaring at the cat flap.

She opened her mouth, about to shout to Jackie again, but her eyes stuck on the nails on the floor. She caught my gaze and motioned me over. I stood and walked to her side while she picked up a nail. Kneeling beside her, I plucked the nail from her grasp. Ashley stared at me. I nodded toward the cat flap. Hesitantly, she opened it. A face stared back at us; a face with bright blue eyes, a large nose, and sticky-outy ears.

Ashley stumbled back on her ass, nearly sitting on the nails, with a shriek most likely caught in her throat. I stood quickly and went to open the door. Ashley scrambled to her feet and grabbed my arm tightly. I looked at her. Her mouth opened and closed several times before choking out "That's him!" in a hoarse voice.

I frowned at her, silently questioning who she meant, even though I knew. Turning back to the door, I reached forward and pulled it open. The Doctor beamed at us.

"Hello," he greeted. "What're you doing here?"

I tilted my head to the side curiously. "She lives here, and I'm visiting. Do I know you?"

The Doctor leaned closer to me, eyes scanning my face. "Not sure, maybe."

I resisted the urge to pout. The Doctor didn't forget things randomly. "Well, we're only here 'cause someone blew up our jobs." I tried to sound irritated, but the words came out as playful.

The Doctor grinned cheekily. He reached into his pocket and pulled out his sonic screwdriver. He pressed a button; it lit up and a soft buzzing emitted from the tip. The Doctor held it up to his face and sighed, disappointed, "Must've gotten the wrong signal."

There he was, right in front of me. The Doctor. Oh, my God. I mean, I'd run into him yesterday but still. He's right here! Barely a foot away. I made a note that I was probably giving him an awestruck stare. I couldn't bring myself to care.

"You're not plastic, are you?" The question was followed by a rough tap on my forehead. Ouch. Okay, inspiring moment over.

Ashley whimpered when he head was tapped. I suppressed my wince. She was confused and frightened and I had forgotten she was there. Reaching back, I took her hand and squeezed it reassuringly. She squeezed back.

"Nope, bone head. Bye then!" The Doctor turned on his heel to leave.

I snatched his jacket collar. "Oh no, you don't," I said, pulling him inside. I shut the door after him and turned to face him. I started to speak but was pulled away by Ashley.

"What?" I asked impatiently.

"What do you mean 'What'?" she whisper-shouted. "That's the guy from Henrik's! Why'd you bring him inside? And how do you know him?"

"Don't you want answers?" I asked. "And I don't know him. It was probably a brief meeting."
Ashley huffed and glared. "What if he's dangerous? He did blow up Henrik's."

I barely held in my giggle. "Ashley, does he look dangerous to you?" We both glanced over to The Doctor, who was exploring his surroundings with wide, curious eyes. He looked like a child. I bit my lip to keep a grin in check. "Besides, he saved your life. That's got to count for something," I assured her.

She frowned and thought for a moment, not looking convinced.

"C'mon Ash, don't you trust me?"

Finally, she nodded her consent. I beamed. "Fantastic! Now, we have a madman to question." I took her hand and pulled her further into the flat.

"Who is it?" Jackie's voice rang from deeper inside.

Ashley beat me to the excuse. "It's about last night. He's from the inquiry. He needs to talk to Dahlia, too. Give us ten minutes!" She walked past me, into another room.

I followed The Doctor.

"Ashley deserves compensation!" Jackie called out.

The Doctor glanced at me and smirked. "Oh yeah, we're talking millions."

Smirking back, I stopped outside Jackie's room. The Doctor did as well and leaned against the door frame.

Jackie appeared. Her eyes skimmed over me before landing on The Doctor. She smiled flirtatiously. "I'm in my dressing gown."

The Doctor grinned, nodding. "Yes, you are."

"There's a strange man in my bedroom."

"Yes, there is," he agreed again.

"Anything could happen," Jackie replied breathlessly, leaning close to The Doctor.

He paused, considering the situation, before chuckling and saying, "No." Jackie scowled at him.

I barked out a laugh, quickly retreating with The Doctor before Jackie could turn on me. We entered the kitchen, where Ashley was clinking cups and dishes.

"Don't mind the mess," she said over her shoulder. "Do you want some coffee?"

The Doctor shrugged. "Might as well, thanks! Just milk."

I frowned and asked, "Only milk in your coffee or just milk?" Ashley froze with the coffee pot in hand, hovering it over an empty mug.

He grinned and threw me a wink. "Coffee and milk." He picked up a magazine. I watched from his side.

Ashley spoke up while pouring coffee, "We should go to the police. Seriously, all three of us." She emphasized the three. I pouted internally. Glancing at The Doctor, I could tell he was ignoring her.
"That won't last. He's gay, and she's an alien," he noted, putting the magazine down and picking up a book.

"It's not like I'm blaming you or anything. It was probably just a prank gone wrong. And I am thankful for you saving my life," Ashley continued.

"Sad ending," The Doctor remarked to me. I nodded in agreement. I'd read the book earlier this year. Really boring book but a sad ending. Not something I would recommend.

"They said they found a body," Ashley said.

I looked at her. "What about everyone else?"

"Got out before the blast. No one else was hurt," she replied.

My body relaxed as I let out the breath I had been holding. So, my lie worked. No one else was hurt. Good.

Out the corner of my eye, I watched The Doctor pick up an envelope and read loud enough for me to hear, "Ashley Tyler." He moved on to the mirror next and gazed into it. "Ah, could've been worse." He grinned brightly and chuckled, "Look at me ears!"

A corner of my mouth quirked up from a suppressed smile.

"All the same, he was nice—a nice bloke," Ashley rambled.

Stretching, I moved to the living room and plopped down on the couch. All the tissues from last night were gone. Jackie had probably thrown them out when she'd first gotten up. Lazily, I watched The Doctor flit around the room. He never stayed in one place or looked at one object for too long. He reminded me of a squirrel.

"You got a cat?" The Doctor asked suddenly.

I tensed. The Doctor searched for where the sound came from. A second later, the plastic arm leaped from its hiding place, attaching itself to his neck. The Doctor stumbled back. I scrambled up, grasped the arm and tried to rip it from The Doctor's neck, but it wouldn't budge.

"Well, we did have, but there are strays," Ashley answered. "They come in off the estate."

How could she not have heard the commotion? The Doctor and I weren't exactly being quiet during our struggle against the plastic arm. Finally, she entered the room, a cup of coffee in each hand.

She rolled her eyes as soon as she caught sight of us. "Honestly Dahlia, I never thought you were one for pranks," she scolded before furrowing her eyebrows. "I told Mickey to chuck that thing out," Ashley muttered, setting the coffee down. She sighed, "Now, why don't you two stop playing games so we can chat? Dahlia and I want answers, Doctor, starting with your real name."

The arm gave way at last. Unfortunately, it latched onto the first thing available: Ashley's face.

Ashley did shriek this time. I rushed to help her. Though, no matter how hard I tugged on the arm, it wouldn't budge. Whirling my head around to face The Doctor, I scowled when I saw him just standing there, smirking.

"Doctor, don't just stand there! Sonic the damn thing!" I snarled.

His smirk dropped, and then he lunged toward us with his sonic screwdriver ready. The Doctor
gripped the arm and used the sonic, causing it to emit a high-pitched buzzing sound.

The arm released Ashley's face. She collapsed on the couch. I, however, crashed to the floor. The Doctor beamed at us, innocently holding up the arm. "It's all right. I stopped it. There you go, see?" he said as he tossed the arm to Ashley. She fumbled a few seconds before catching it and then promptly slung it at me. It smacked me in the face.

"'Armless!' The Doctor teased gently.

I jumped to my feet and smacked him in the shoulder with the arm. The Doctor cried out "Ow!" indignantly with threw a pout at me. I rolled my eyes that the overreaction.
Scent of Burning Plastic

Seconds later, The Doctor had sprinted out of the Tyler flat and was rushing down the stairs, the plastic arm in hand. Ashley and I (after grabbing my bag) immediately followed.

"Hey! Hold on a minute! You can't just go swanning off!" Ashley cried out indignantly.

He turned around and replied, a huge grin on his face, "Yes, I can. Here I am—this is me—swannin’ off. See ya!" The Doctor resumed his dash down the stairs.

My lips quirked upwards in a smirk I couldn't keep down. I had always loved that line for some reason.

Ashley scowled. "That arm was moving. It tried to kill me!"

"Ten out of ten for observation," The Doctor remarked.

I snorted in amusement this time. Ashley glared at me.

Smiling, I said, "You have to admit, he's got a point."

She huffed before calling out to The Doctor again. "You can't just walk away! That's not fair! You've got to tell us what's going on!"

"No, I don't," The Doctor said over his shoulder.

We finally caught up to him, and Ashley panted out her question: "Who are you?"

He straightened immediately. "I told you—The Doctor," he replied proudly.

My friend rolled her eyes and reached to take the arm from The Doctor. "Really though, Doctor, tell me—who are you?"

I watched silently. There was no point in interrupting their conversation. I had nothing of importance to add anyway, so I just stood between them. *I hope I don't have to mediate between them*, I thought warily. Ashley tended to smack people when she got frustrated.

The Doctor's expression switched from carefree to solemn. "Do you know like we were saying? About the earth revolving?" he told us. "It's like when you were a kid. The first time they tell you the world's turning, and you just can't quite believe it because everything looks like it's standing still." He paused and looked up at the sky; his eyes got a distant look in them. He shifted his faze back to us, staring into Ashley's eyes and then into mine.

My breath hitched. The Doctor took Ashley's hand. Then he reached for mine. I fought down the temptation to repeat his next words with him.

"The turn of the earth. The ground beneath our feet is spinning at a thousand miles an hour, and the entire planet is hurtling around the sun at sixty-seven thousand miles an hour." The Doctor's hand tightened around my own. Ashley was dead silent. "And I can feel it. We're falling through space. You two and me, clinging to the skin of this tiny little world, and if we let go . . ." he finished, releasing both our hands. "Now forget me, Ashley and Dahlia," The Doctor advised sternly. He took the arm from Ashley and waved it in our faces. "Go home." He walked toward the blue box a few yards away.
Ashley frowned but stuffed her hands in her pockets and started toward her and Jackie's flat. I didn't follow. She must've noticed because I heard her shout, "Dahlia, you coming?"

Shaking my head, I responded, "No, I think I'm just gonna go home."

She tilted her head to the side. "You sure? You don't have to. Mum'll be glad to have someone to look after me constantly." Her mouth quirked up in a small smile.

I chuckled. "Yeah, I'm sure. I doubt I could take much more of her yelling, though."

Ashley laughed, saying, "You're right. If I had the chance to escape, I'd take it, too." She waved and started toward Powell Estate. "See you later."

"Bye." I wave at her retreating form. I waited just until she was out of sight before making a mad dash toward the TARDIS. The entire time Ashley and I had been talking, I had waited, fearfully, for the sound declaring its take off. It hadn't come. Now, adrenaline pumped through my body as anticipation and anxiety for the conversation The Doctor and I were about to have set in. Hopefully, he would believe me.

I approached the door to the TARDIS cautiously and took out my key. My hands trembled. I took a deep breath and shook my entire body to rid myself of the jitters.

"You can do this, Dahlia, I told myself confidently. You've rehearsed this a thousand time. The Doctor's reasonable and understanding—even if he has a temper.

Holding in another breath, I bit my lip and entered the key in the lock, twisting it until I heard a soft click.

The door swung open easily, not uttering a creak or squeak. I stepped inside just as silently. I tried not to gape at the innards of the TARDIS this time. I had a mission. There would be time to gape later. Wait, I thought, frowning, where was The Doctor?

Curses in strange languages and English found my ears. Inching up the ramp, I saw The Doctor kneeling under a part of the TARDIS and fiddling with two wires, sonic screwdriver in hand. He was completely oblivious to my presence. Something in the back of my mind hinted at me to startle him. That it would be hilarious. I could tell it was the TARDIS; she wanted to have some fun with her thief.

Forcing down my giggles, I took another calming breath before calling out, "Whatever you're trying to do, Doctor, it won't work."

The Doctor startled. He yelped and jumped, smacking his head into the underside of the console and dropping his sonic in the process. Clutching his head and groaning, The Doctor fell back on his ass.

I didn't stop my giggles from becoming full on laughter.

The Doctor glared at me as he stood. "That wasn't funny."

I raised an eyebrow and smirked. "Oh? Well your TARDIS seems to think so." Indeed, the TARDIS was buzzing with her own form of laughter.

The Doctor froze. His expression turned stony while his glared intensified.

My playful mood slipped. Shit. I think I triggered The Oncoming Storm.
"How do you know about the TARDIS?" he asked lowly as he advanced on me. His long strides made it easy for him to stop inches from me. "And come to think of it, you told me to use the sonic on the arm back there. How'd you know about that?"

I gulped. This was not how I hoped this meeting would start off. "I can explain that," I fought the waver out of my voice. "If you'd let me. Though, I'm not sure you'll believe me."

He relaxed, but only slightly, and continued to stare. "I'm listening," he spat coldly.

Inhaling deeply for the fourth time in the past ten minutes, I started my explanation: "You know how there are all those alternate dimensions?" The Doctor nodded in acknowledgement. "Well, I'm from one of them, and in my universe, your world is a TV show. A very popular TV show. I know all about you and this world. I also know, up to a certain point, your future," I finished, not breaking eye contact.

The Doctor's eyes widened; his stance slackened; his mouth fell open. He sputtered for a few seconds before getting his bearings. "Wasn't expecting that," The Doctor muttered irritably.

Not knowing what to say, I stayed silent.

The Doctor turned around and walked back up the ramp, motioning for me to follow him. I hesitantly followed. The Doctor leaned against the console and, beaming brightly, inclined his head toward the captain's seat. In a comforting tone, he said, "Please, sit."

I sat down.

My nervousness must've shown because his grin faltered. The Doctor sighed. "I'm sorry about . . ."

"Going all Oncoming Storm on me?" I finished softly.

The Doctor bowed his head, nodding. "Yeah."

Smiling gently, I waved off his apology. "It's fine, as long as you understand now."

He frowned at that. "I understand how you know so much, but how did you get here? If my life's a show in the telly, then you couldn't have gotten a TARDIS."

I bit my lip. This was where things could get difficult. Should I tell him—mostly—why and how I was brought here? Or do I lie and make up something? Lying would be easy. All I had to do was spout off some theory about a rift transporting me here, but lying could have horrible consequences later. The Doctor had already gone Oncoming Storm on me once; I really didn't want that to happen again. The choice was easy.

"I was kidnapped from my world and brought here," I said resolutely.

The Doctor's eyebrows furrowed. "Kidnapped?" he questioned curiously. "By who?"

I pursed my lips. "I can't tell you."

"Why not?"

"You can't know he exists yet. It would mess the order up."

"Dahlia, I'm a Time Lord. I can handle it."

I resisted the urge to scowl and snap at him. At that moment, The Doctor had sounded so damn
pompous. He acted like I didn't understand the situation at all. Bullshit. As of now, The Doctor would learn to respect me, even if I was a lowly human.

"No, you can't. Messing up the order is what my kidnapper brought me here to stop," I said. "Unlike what you think, Doctor, I know how this works. I've watched Doctor Who religiously, and you don't go messin' with the order." Looking him in the eye, I summed it up: "That's it. End of story. Next question."

I could see The Doctor's frustration growing but also his wonder.

"What do you mean that's why you were brought here?" he asked.

I snorted. Of course, he would lock in on that and completely ignore the fact that I was standing up to him.

Pinching the bridge of my nose, I explained the situation in more depth: "The man who originally kidnapped me explained his reason for bringing me here quite plainly. An event that was supposed to happen didn't. He brought me here to make sure the specified event happens and, in turn, the universe doesn't collapse."

The Doctor thought for a moment, staring at me intently. "This event is in my future, isn't it?"

I nodded.

"Why did this event not happen?" I didn't answer. I knew it was rhetorical when The Doctor shoved off the console, carted a hand through his military cut hair, and started pacing. "The universe has failsafes for this sort of thing. Oh," he turned back to me, "a failsafe for the universe is like a normal failsafe except on a much larger scale and only for extremely important events."

"I know what a universal failsafe is, Doctor," I cut him off before he started up again, rolling my eyes.

He blinked, surprised, "Did you learn that from the show, too?"

"No. I can just infer."

"Really? Fantastic! Wait—no. Still fantastic, but not important." The Doctor fumbled, "The reality is—you shouldn't be here!"

Maybe if I smack him, he'll stop panicking.

"Doctor? Doctor. Doctor!" I snapped, finally gaining his attention.

The Doctor stared at me uncomprehendingly. It seemed like he wasn't used to having others interrupt his rambling. "Yes?"

Smirking, I pointed out, "Isn't there something more important you should be doing than contemplating why I'm here?"

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"There is?" he frowned and started wracking his brain for an answer.

I raised an eyebrow, asking sarcastically, "The Nestene Consciousness?"

It finally dawned on him that there were living plastic creatures outside. "Right! We should get going!"
"We?" I asked cautiously, watching him dash around the console.

He grinned madly at me. "Of course, we! You're obviously coming with me! I could use the help." He winked. I giggled, finally returning his grin.

Hopping off the captain's seat, I stood beside The Doctor. My eyes flickered over the console, resting on a buzzing lever. I reached for it, wrapped my fingers around the handle, and looked at The Doctor for confirmation. He smiled encouragingly, his eyes warm. I grinned wickedly and jerked the lever down. The Doctor and I held on for dear life as the TARDIS started shaking.

"Hey," The Doctor nudged me.

"Yeah?"

"How'd you get in here anyway? I locked the door," he asked.

"That's all? The TARDIS gave me a key," I answered simply but smugly.

The Doctor gaped at me. "What?"

A jerk of the TARDIS and my cackling laughter cut him off.

Oh yeah. This was going to be fun.

"We're clear on the plan, right?" The Doctor asked me for the fifth time.

The TARDIS had been tracking the signal from the plastic arm when the arm melted. The Doctor had to make an emergency stop before we crashed into Slen 12-V in the Faruwel Sector of the Brooshg Galaxy (Yeah, I can't believe I remembered that either). After a short bout of pouting (The Doctor), a mild temper tantrum (also The Doctor), and a suggestion (me), The Doctor tracked a new signal to a pizza parlor; the same restaurant Ashley had texted me to meet her and Mickey at.

Slinging my bag over my shoulder, I repeated irritably, "Yes, Doctor, I know the plan. Why wouldn't I? You've gone over it five times even though I know what's going to happen."

The Doctor threw a pout at me. "Well, someone's rather agitated," he mumbled.

"You'd be irritated, too, if someone kept treating you like a child," I shot back.

He stiffened for a second and relaxed. "You're right, sorry. I'm just not . . ." he trailed off, sending me a meaningful look.

Guilt settled in my stomach. I shouldn't be so hard on him. Who knew how long it had been since he'd last had a companion? I gave him a shaky smile. "Used to being around people who can keep up with you," I recited quietly. "I know, I'm sorry."

"It's all right. I understand. I'll try to be more . . . respectful in the future," he said, then added nervously, "If you want to stay after this is over, that is."

It was my turn to freeze up. He was asking me to stay? I thought it would be unspoken amongst us that I had to travel with him. If I didn't, the universe would implode. Maybe it was just a habit or formality. Yeah—The Doctor probably just didn't want to assume anything. There was the Time War to consider, too. I didn't know how long ago it had been. But what if he meant something else?
Did he think I would leave? Shit. I'd been quiet for too long.

Smacking myself mentally, I thought, *Get a hold of yourself. First, kick the Nestene Consciousness in its plastic ass. You and The Doctor can have a heart to heart later.*

Awkwardly shifting from foot to foot, I cleared my throat, "I'll see you in a minute, then?"

He cleared his throat, as well. "Yeah, just make sure you're careful. Never know what a plastic creature'll do when threatened, though, I suppose killing you in a horrible manner would work well."

I shook my head and left The Doctor to his muttering, exiting the TARDIS and entering the pizza parlor.

Spotting Ashley and Plastic Mickey was easy. There weren't many people in the restaurant. What was difficult was resisting the urge to simply grab Ashley and run back to the TARDIS. She wasn't made for danger and aliens and insane plans; she'd end up getting hurt.

My sudden protective thoughts surprised me. I'd never had them before. Sure, I'd warned her against things before, but those were trivial things: boys, job interviews, or a shopping trip she couldn't afford, things like that.

Perhaps it was because the danger was life threatening this time . . .

Ashley perked up when she caught sight of me. Grinning, she called out, "Dahlia! Over here!"

Cautiously sliding into the seat between them, I eyed Plastic Mickey. He glared at me distrustfully; I grinned back.

"I was just asking Mickey where I could get a new job," Ashley chatted. "I'd rather not serve chips the rest of my life."

Plastic Mickey decided he could now ignore me. He turned back to Ashley, asking, "Where did you meet this Doctor?"

She faced him and scowled, "Oh, I'm sorry. Was I talking about me for a second?"

He just barreled through her words. "Cause I reckon it all started at the shop. Am I right? Had he something to do with that?"

Ashley's eyes widened and she looked at me, begging for me to come up with some sort of excuse. I nearly laughed. Ashley never could keep a secret. She just didn't have the willpower. Oh well, I might as well intervene.

"No, he wasn't, and you shouldn't ask if she doesn't want to talk about it, Mickey," I warned, glaring at him.

He glowered at me before dismissing my comment and interrogating Ashley again. "Come on, I know he was."

Ashley's resolve started to crumble, "Well, maybe a little."

Plastic Mickey beamed. "I knew it! What's he planning?"

"I don't know," Ashley snapped. "Now, can we please stop talking about The Doctor?"

A frown marred Ashley's face. "I said I don't know."

I watched her wince when his grip tightened.

"Babe. Sweetheart. Sugar. Sweetheart. Babe," his head jerked this time. He stared unblinkingly at Ashley as he urged, "Come on, tell me what The Doctor's got planned."

A voice interrupted the argument: "Champagne anyone?"

My eyes flicked up to meet The Doctor's mischievous gaze. He winked.

"It's not ours," Plastic Mickey dismissed without looking. He returned to prodding Ashley's limited information.

The Doctor pouted but shifted to Ashley. "Champagne, Miss?"

"No thanks," she said, dismissing him as easily as Plastic Mickey.

Biting my lip to keep from giggling, I stole another glance at The Doctor. He actually looked irritated now. He glared at my smirk. I snickered.

"Doesn't anyone want this champagne?" The Doctor huffed.

Plastic Mickey, finally irritated enough, jerked his head toward The Doctor and growled, "It's not ours! I already—" An evil smile slinked across his mouth. "The Doctor."

All Ashley could do was gape.

Grinning like some escaped mad man, The Doctor point the bottle at Plastic Mickey and said, "Cheers to the happy couple!" He popped the cork off, sending it flying into the imposter's forehead.

Lightning fast, I snatched Ashley's hand and jerked her away from the table to the back door. After shoving her outside, I slammed the fire alarm down. "Everybody out! Now!" I yelled. In my peripheral vision, I caught a glimpse of The Doctor yanking Plastic Mickey's head off. "Mickey's" mouth moved. I couldn't hear from where I was standing, but I knew what he said.

The Doctor managed to dodge when the headless creature broke the table. The Doctor rushed towards me.

"Dahlia!"

Whipping my head around, I found Ashley peering back inside. Shock and fright flared in her eyes.

"Out!" I dove outside with The Doctor on my heels. I shut the door while he soniced it closed.

"Dahlia, help me with this!" Ashley cried out from behind me.

Looking back at her, I shook my head. "There's no point in trying that, Ashley. It won't open. Besides, we came in with a plan." I looked back to The Doctor. He just grinned.

Ashley glared at us. "Open the gate! Use that tube thing, come on!" she yelled.
"What—this? This is a sonic screwdriver," The Doctor said proudly, waving the item in his hand.

"Use it!" she yelled again.

The Doctor waved off her worry, "Nah. Tell ya what, let's go in here." He strutted over to the TARDIS and unlocked it, slipping inside.

Loud clangs signaled that Plastic Mickey had found us and was trying his best to break the door down

"We can't hide in a wooden box!" Ashley replied shrilly, gaping with wide eyes at the TARDIS.

I barked out, "Ashley, you need to trust me."

Her attention refocused on me. "But it's a box, Dahlia! He'll break right through!"

"When have I intentionally steered you wrong? Please, Ashley, that box is the safest place on Earth right now." I was nearly pleading. Damnit Ashley, just get in the box.

She bit her lip, chewing it as he thought. Something she only did when she regarded something very carefully. She took a tentative step forward. "I-I don't know. How can we trust him?"

Smirking, I winked and held out a hand. "'Cause, he's The Doctor."

Even though it was obvious she didn't really believe me, Ashley took my hand anyway. I gripped it tightly and pulled her inside the TARDIS. The Doctor merely grinned over his shoulder at us, not pausing while he connected the head to the console.

I decided it would be best to explain everything to Ashley now; I didn't want her to worry about Mickey when he would be fine. Just as I turned around, a strangled sound caught my attention.

Oh no . . .

Ashley had her hands over her mouth and nose, trying to stifle her whines and sobs. Tears overflowed from her eyes to drip down her cheeks in streams. Terror and shock permeated the air around her, making her quake and shiver. Her eyes darted around the console room.

I reached out to curl my arm over her shoulder. My heart clenched when she shirked away from me. I cooed words of comfort to her.

"You see, the arm is too simple, but the head's perfect," The Doctor pointed out suddenly. "'Cause, he's The Doctor."

Ashley wheezed and collapsed. I barely managed to catch her before she bruised her ass.

"It's called the TARDIS, this thing," The Doctor continued proudly, oblivious of Ashley's mental anguish. "T-A-R-D-I-S, that's Time And Relative Dimension In Space."

I gritted my teeth and cradled Ashley to my side, letting her sob openly into my shoulder. Anger burned in my gut. Sometimes I hated how The Doctor could get wrapped up in his own world.

"That's okay. Culture shock—happens to the best of us," he noted, to me or himself I couldn't be sure.

Reigning in my anger, I tried to explain stiffly, "She's not in culture shock. She's—"
"Did they kill him? Mickey? Did they kill Mickey? Is he dead?" Ashley interrupted me, desperation overwhelming her and nearly choking off her last question.

I opened my mouth to quickly explain but was interrupted again.

"Oh," The Doctor frowned, caught off guard, "didn't think of that."

Ashley suddenly ripped from my embrace—knocking me over—and stood, her expression livid. "He's my boyfriend! You pulled off his head, you bastard! They copied him, and you didn't even think? And now you're just going to let him melt?" she screamed, advancing a few steps toward The Doctor.

I righted myself and stood as well. Peering around The Doctor, I saw it. Sure enough—Plastic Mickey's head was melting and sinking in on itself.

"Melt?" The Doctor exclaimed. He looked at the console. He frantically ran to the panel, yelling, "Oh, no-no-no-no-no-NO!" He jerked levers faster than I'd ever seen.

Ashley turned to me for an explanation. "What's he doing? What is he?"

"Got to revive the signal. It's fading! Wait! I've got it! No-no-no-no-no-no-no-no-NO!" The Doctor panicked to himself. He was caught up in his own little bubble.

I took a deep breath to prepare myself. "Okay, he's an alien. This is his time/space ship. He's tracking a signal from that head to its creator. When he finds the creator, he's going to tell them to shove off and leave Earth alone," I summarized. "That's the short version."

Ashley looked about ready to faint. She was trying to come up with a logical explanation for the situation but couldn't find one. "And Mickey?" she choked out.

I smiled reassuringly. "Mickey's—"

The TARDIS shook, cutting me off. Ashley and I grabbed the railing the keep from falling.

We heard The Doctor urge from the console: "Almost there! Almost there! Here we go!"

The Doctor rushed out the doors as soon as the shaking stopped.

"You-you can't go out there! It's not safe," Ashley whimpered.

I shook my head and tugged her outside after me.

My friend's hand tightened and then went slack in my grip. I gnawed on my lip. Please don't let her have another freak out.

"I lost the signal. I got so close," The Doctor moaned, leaning over the bridge.

"We-we've moved," Ashley's voice cracked.

"Disappears there, reappears here—you wouldn't understand," The Doctor replied rudely.

Ashley started to panic. "But if we're somewhere else, what about that headless thing? It's still on the loose."

"It melted with the head. Are you going to witter on all night," The Doctor snapped.
Why? Why did they have to argue? Why couldn't this have gone differently than the episode? Why couldn't just one thing be easy for me?

"I'll have to tell his mother . . ." Ashley whispered.

The Doctor shot her a frustrated and puzzled look.

"Mickey! I'll have to tell his mother he's dead, and you just went and forgot him—again!" Ashley shrieked at him.

The Doctor said nothing.

Ashley glared coldly at him, not backing down when he met her stare.

The Doctor spoke sternly, "Look, if I did forget some kid called Mickey—"

The blonde butted in, "Yeah, he's not a kid."

He plowed on anyway, "It's because I'm trying to save the life of every stupid ape blundering on top of this planet, all right?"

"No, it's not!" Ashley snarled back.

I perked up. Okay, what? That wasn't the line. Roes just agreed with The Doctor, asked about the TARDIS, and they . . . went . . . on their merry way. Fuck. I kept forgetting this wasn't Rose. This was Ashley, and she didn't behave like Rose would.

One glance at my companions told me all I needed to know. This was getting out of hand. It was time for me to intervene.

"Okay, that's enough," I said, stepping in between them. "Ashley, calm down, and you . . . go stand by the TARDIS." I pointed toward the blue box.

The Doctor glowered at me for a few seconds before obeying.

Huffing, I turned back to Ashley. She was still obviously pissed off, but my intervening made her cool off a bit. I pinched the bridge of my nose and sighed. "Ashley, look, I know this is all a lot to take in but—"

"No, Dahlia, you don't know," Ashley snapped. "Tonight, everything I thought I knew about the world blew up in my face. I got attacked by a plastic monster . . . and my boyfriend is probably dead. Believe me—you have no idea what I'm going through."

I blinked, taken aback. Then I realized she was right. I had no clue what she was going through. I could imagine, but I didn't really know.

Ashley started crying again. "I-I'm sorry, Dahlia. I just . . . I just . . ."

I embraced her again. "It's okay. It's hard, and I'm sorry you have to go through this," I apologized.

"I can't do this, Dahlia. I'm not strong like you are, and whenever I look at The Doctor, all I think about is Mickey," Ashley cried.

"Mickey is fine," I informed, "He's just being held captive so they can maintain the plastic copy they made. Or to make more, either way, he's safe and we'll get him back."
She looked up at me, frowning, and asked, "How can you be so sure?"

Smiling, I replied, "Because, that's what happens in every scifi show. See? This is when all of my nerd knowledge comes in handy."

She smiled back. It was a weak one but still a smile.

A moment's silence washed over us.

Should I tell her? I mean, now's definitely not a good time, but with the condition she's in . . .

"Ashley," I started, "I think you should go home."

She blinked rapidly. "What?"

I carefully chose my words. This could easily blow up in my face. "Where we're going, it's going to be dangerous, and I don't want you to get hurt."

"You mean you don't want me getting in the way," Ashley whispered.

"I didn't say that," I insisted, but didn't deny.

"It's all right. I understand, and you're right. I'm not cut out for this kind of life. Just promise me you'll get Mickey back."

"Of course," I promised.

"Good," she mumbled. "Then I guess I'll see you later."

"Yeah," I said lamely.

She smiled. "Good luck. Especially with him." Her gaze lingered on The Doctor.

I waved to her as she left.

The Doctor shifted uncomfortably by the TARDIS. He had obviously heard everything. He cleared his throat.

"Don't," I stopped him. "There's nothing you can say. I understand you've been through a lot, Doctor, but that's no reason to take it out on Ashley. She's only worried about her boyfriend. And yes, you are under a lot of pressure, but please, have a bit more patience with us apes. Most of us rarely ever see the big picture."

The Doctor was leaning against the TARDIS with his hands shoved in his pockets. He obviously didn't like being spoken to like that.

My neck and shoulders ached. After rolling them, I clapped my hands together. The Doctor's head snapped to me. "Now that that's out of the way, we need to find the Nestene Consciousness."

"And how will we do that? I lost the signal and have no idea where the transmitter is," The Doctor remarked.

"Well, it's a good thing you have me then," I stated proudly.

Turning on my hell, I faced the skyline and pointed. "There's your transmitter—the London Eye."
He eyed me suspiciously. "How do you know?"

I looked at him like 'Really? You don't get it?' "'Round'? 'Massive'? 'Slap bang in the middle of London'?" I quoted. "'Huge, circular, metal structure'? 'Like a dish'?"

He stared at the Eye for another few seconds before it finally sunk in. He beamed at me. "Fantastic!" Grabbing my hand, The Doctor started running.

"Think about it—plastic, all over the world! Every artificial thing waiting to come alive! The shop window dummies, the phones, the wires, the cables . . ." The Doctor looked back at me for my reaction.

I couldn't help myself: "The breast implants."

The Doctor laughed.

"Still, we've found the transmitter. The Consciousness must be somewhere underneath," The Doctor said, mostly to himself.

It was my turn to lead him. I pulled him to the correct manhole and lifted it. "One entrance with a side of rank," I said brightly, wrinkling my nose at the stench.

The Doctor smiled again. He gestured dramatically. "After you."

I rolled my eyes, muttering, "Because a gentleman allows the lady to go down the hole first."

He only winked.

I stopped The Doctor from walking any further down the sewer. I held out my hand.

He blinked owlishly at me. "What?"

"Hand over the anti-plastic. It's better if I hold onto it," I ordered.

The Doctor didn't think long before handing over the blue vial. I merely blinked at the item I now held.

"Somethin' wrong?" The Doctor questioned.

I snapped out of it. "Uh—no! Just didn't think you'd give it to me that easily." I smiled sheepishly.

He shrugged. "There's no reason for me to doubt you." He continued walking.

I stuffed the anti-plastic into my pocket and caught up to him.

We finally saw the Nestene Consciousness. I had to admit, even though I was seeing it in real life, I had a hard time believing that orange blob in the huge vat was a living creature.

I followed The Doctor as he stepped down the stairs. The Doctor leaned over the railing. He called out, "I seek audience with the Nestene Consciousness under peaceful contract according to Convention 15 of the Shadow Proclamation."

The Consciousness shifted in acknowledgement.
"Thank you—that I might have permission to approach," The Doctor finished.

I peered around until I found Mickey. Upon seeing him huddled in a corner, I hopped down the steps toward him. Crouching next to him, I attempted to comfort him, "It's all right, Mickey. We're here to save you."

"And the rest of Earth," The Doctor butted in.

I glared at him. Definitely not helping right now.

"That thing down there, the liquid, Dahlia—it can talk!" Mickey spouted out.

I merely patted his back as I watched The Doctor.

"Am I addressing the Consciousness? Thank you," The Doctor said. "If I might observe, you infiltrated this civilization by means of warped, shunt technology. So, may I suggest, with the greatest respect, that you shunt off?" The Doctor smirked at his little joke.

The liquid squirmed and growled.

The Doctor's face scrunched. "Don't give me that! It's an invasion, plain and simple! Don't talk about constitutional rights!"

The Consciousness lurched, shrieking what were possibly obscenities.

"I. Am. Talking!" The Doctor shouted.

Goosebumps prickled over my skin. There was The Oncoming Storm.

"This planet is just starting. These stupid little people have only just learned how to walk, but they're capable of so much more. I'm asking you on their behalf. Please, just go," The Doctor pleaded.

My gut clenched when two plastic men started towards him. "Doctor, behind you!" But it was no use. The plastics already had him in their grasp.

The Doctor struggled while he desperately tried to plead with the creature. "I'm here to help! I'm not your enemy. I swear, I'm not—what do you mean?" he asked suddenly, amongst the growls of the Consciousness.

My eyes shot up to the doors on the platform. The doors opened, revealing the TARDIS.

"Oh, oh no! Honestly, no!" The Doctor slumped. He sighed out, defeated, "Yes, that's my ship."

Obviously furious, the plastic alien roared, lurching in its container.

The Doctor's face went slack with remorse and pain. "That's not true! I should know—I was there. I fought in the war. It wasn't my fault! I couldn't save your world! I couldn't save any of them!" he cried out desperately.

Our surroundings started to shake. The Nestene Consciousness shrieked. I held my breath. Mickey whimpered.

The Doctor struggled until he could look at me. "Dahlia! You need to get out! Just leg it! Now!" he shouted.
His words snapped me out of my daze. *No,* I thought, his voice still ringing in my ears. *No one else has to get hurt.*

"It's the activation signal! It's transmitting! Get out! Dahlia!"

Pieces of the crumbling ceiling fell around me. The stairs disappeared. I ordered Mickey to stay by the TARDIS. I rushed over to the axe was and took it in-hand. The axe was heavy in my grip and even heavier when I swung it.

*CLANG!*

If the world hadn't been going to Hell, I would've thought up another plan, but it was, so I slid into my role as a companion.

After grabbing the loose chains with one hand, I slipped the anti-plastic from my pocket and into my free hand. Honestly, I didn't know how I was going to hold onto the chains.

I finally just went for it.

Gripping the chain with the vial between my hands, I sent off a short prayer. I swung across the cavern. I kicked out my feet, hitting both plastic men in to the vat. Barely a second later, the anti-plastic followed.

"Dahlia! Let go!"

I glanced below me. The Doctor was holding out his arms.

I was going to bitch at him to go get a fucking ladder, but the Nestene's scream of pain shocked me into letting go. The Doctor's strong arms caught me. The scent of burning plastic filled my nostrils. I groaned; my head was pounding awfully. The Doctor gave me a quick look over for injuries. When he saw none, he took off toward the TARDIS, not even bothering to set me down until we were right at the ship.

The Doctor took precious moments prying Mickey off the TARDIS. The stupid boy only let go when I smacked him upside the head and screamed we'd leave him if he didn't let go. Eventually, we all managed to pile into the TARDIS and disappear just as the Consciousness erupted.

Mickey stumbled out of the TARDIS first when we landed. He collapsed in a group of trash bins. I calmly strutted out after him, shaking my head. *Pansy.*

Lifting my hands up, I examined them. Rust clung to my swollen, red skin. Flexing them rewarded me with a stinging, burning pain. I dropped my arms to my sides and rolled my shoulders. Just a small injury. Nothing I couldn't handle.

The Doctor hovered in the doorway behind me. "Still hurts?" he asked, concern lacing his tone.

I answered him with a shrug. No need to worry him.

"Hey." I turned to him and immediately froze. The Doctor's eyes glowed brightly. They were happy and curious and sad all at once. The Doctor wore a strange smile; it held too many emotions to decipher.

"Thank you," he finished.

Warmth flooded my cheeks. Even if I was just following the script, if felt nice to be thanked. "No
biggie—I was just doing what I was supposed to."

The Doctor shook his head, his smiled widening. "No, no just that—you knew what was going to happen, yet you didn't take the easy way out. You didn't tell me, either, hoping I'd take care of it," he faltered, looking unsure of himself. "And I'd be honored to have you travel with me."

The Doctor was asking me to be his companion. That offer earlier hadn't been a mistake or precaution. I met The Doctor's apprehensive eyes.

"We're already been over this, Doctor," I said firmly. "I have to go with you or, you know, the universe will collapse."

The Doctor winced and countered, "I don't like forcing people to travel with me, Dahlia."

Oh. So, that's what he was so upset about. He thought the only reason I was going with him was because I had to. Well, time to fix that.

"Doctor, I—"

Mickey cut me off. "You can't! He's an alien! He's a thing!"

Sighing, I held up a hand to The Doctor, signaling for him to wait a moment. I walked over to Mickey. "Mickey, I know you don't understand right now and probably won't later, but I have to do this. Not just for the universe, but for a friend, as well." Koschei in his final moments drifted to mind.

"What kind of friend would ask you to travel with that mad man?" Mickey demanded.

A corner of my mouth twitched into a smirk. "Actually, he's a mad man with a box."

Mickey glared. "What difference does it make?"

"Oh, it makes all the difference. Now," I dug around in my pocket, "I need you to do something for me." I pulled out a folded, slightly crumpled envelope. I held it out to Mickey. "This is for Ashley. Hopefully, it'll answer her questions. Don't open or read it. Ashley can tell you if she wants."

Mickey stared blankly at the envelope. I flicked it into his lap.

"Just make sure she gets it," I ordered, my irritation sinking through. Turning on my heel, I walked back to The Doctor.

"Doctor, you might find this hard to believe, but there are fewer places I'd rather be than traveling with you," I admitted honestly.

A real smile covered half The Doctor's face, lighting up his eyes like lightning bugs. "And where would you rather be?" he asked excitedly, rubbing his hands together. I could practically see the cogs turning in his head.

"Feudal Japan, Universal Studios, or a Queen concert, not to give you any ideas or anything," I teased.

"I guess we should get started then," The Doctor said, motioning for me to enter the TARDIS first.

Once we were both inside, he closed the doors and ushered to the console. The Doctor flew around the console, nearly tripping over me in his excitement. He paused, hand over what seemed to be the final series of buttons, and looked at me. "Dahlia?"
"Yeah?" I was gripping the console tightly in anticipation.

"I promise, no matter what, I'll get you home." His voice was so tense, that if it weren't for the childish gleam in his eyes, I would've thought The Oncoming Storm was back.

I smiled kindly. "I know, Doctor."

The Doctor smiled, too, and typed in the last code. The TARDIS roared to life. We were off.
"So, Dahlia, where do you want to go? Backwards or forwards in time? It's your choice. What's it going to be?" The Doctor asked. His grin could cheer up a room full of mournful crickets.

I leaned on the console and pretended to think. "Let's start in fast forward."

He tapped a few buttons and looked up, raising an eyebrow. "How far?" he urged.

Pretending to search for a number, I finally answered nonchalantly, "One hundred years."

The Doctor pulled a lever and rotated a knob. The TARDIS rattled, the engines screeched, and then everything settled.

The Doctor straightened proudly. "There you go, step outside those doors, it's the twenty-second century."

I pouted slightly, staring at the doors.

"Something wrong?" The Doctor asked warily.

I shook my head. "No, it's just," I smiled impishly, "that's a bit boring, isn't it?"

A smirk relieved The Doctor's frown. Relief unwound his readied muscles. He scooted closer to me, nudging my shoulder, and teased, "What? You want to go further?"

I grinned back. "Hell yes!"

The Doctor chuckled and started the engines. This time though, after he rolled a wheel, he took my hand in his and placed it on some thingamabob. "Pump it seven times exactly," The Doctor directed.

My eyes widened. Was he trying to teach me how to pilot the TARDIS? He never did that on the show with any of his companions. Maybe he did it in real life. This wasn't Doctor Who.

I did as I was told. The Doctor turned a dial. The Doctor winked when we landed. "Ten thousand years in the future. Step outside—it's the year 12005, the New Roman Empire."

I always wanted to see that. Truth be told, I didn't just want to follow the script. Being here with The Doctor made me yearn for my own adventures. I didn't want to be a replacement Rose. But at the same time, I knew I couldn't stray too far from my original path. Koschei would be so pissed off if he knew I endangered his dimension because of a silly human feeling of wanting to stand out.

Sighing internally, I made a promise to myself to make The Doctor bring me back here. Just because I had to follow the show didn't mean I couldn't do things in between.

"Impressed?" The Doctor asked teasingly, his breath tickling my ear.

Hadn't he ever heard of personal space?

Suddenly, I was hyper-aware of his presence behind me. The Doctor's head was still hovering over my shoulder; his tall, well-muscled body gave off an unnatural heat—perhaps natural for him; his right arm supported his weight on the console at my side. God, I thought, butterflies exploding in
my stomach, *if I turn right now, I could kiss him*. I tensed my body as it twisted instinctively.

No! I needed to stop those thoughts. The Doctor made it a rule not to get into relationships with his companions, excluding Rose. A bitter taste followed the thought, filling my mouth.


The Doctor pouted cutely and griped, "Why not?"

Amusement made me snort. "You have to remember, Doctor, I know what this ol’ girl can do. I won't be impressed just by any old thing," I mocked coyly. Patting his cheek, I giggled, "And you thought you were being impressive."

He cried out indignantly, "I am so impressive!"

"Prove it," I goaded.

The Doctor gave me a "Challenge Accepted" look, exact stance and all. "Right then, you asked for it," The Doctor said lowly. "I know exactly where to go." He reached for the wheel and rolled it multiple times, much longer than the first time. Then he leaned in close to me, reaching around to a switch on the console. "Hold on," he mumbled, flipping the switch.

A lever on my right hummed. Smiling crookedly at The Doctor, I lazily tugged the lever down with a finger.

The engines blared to life for the third time; the whooshing noise filled my ears as we whirled through the Time Vortex.

Idly, a thought came to me. *What does the Vortex look like as you fall through it with a nine-hundred-year-old mad man in a blue box that's bigger on the inside?* While the show gave me an idea of what the Vortex looked like, I needed to know for sure. Perhaps The Doctor would cure my curiosity if I asked nicely.

I slowly blinked back into reality. While the lurching and twirling of the TARDIS hadn't broken my thoughts (It had actually lulled me farther into them), The Doctor's movement did. He twisted a different lever and curled towards a hotel-style bell, bent on ringing it, but I beat him to it. The Doctor mock glared at me, but I saw the humor in his eyes. I smile back innocently with thinly veiled mischief. We were both so caught up in our staring contest we almost didn't notice the pinging of the bell signaled the TARDIS' landing.

I broke first, looking to the doors with watery eyes. The Doctor's grin of victory didn't escape my notice.

"What could ever be out there?" I wondered, puzzled—quite obviously faking—out loud.

The Doctor straightened and strutted to the doors. He made a grand gesture to them and haughtily challenged, "Why not step outside and see for yourself?"

I didn't answer right away. First, I tugged my bag out of the captain's seat, slinging it over my shoulder. Putting on my own air of superiority, I, too, sauntered down the walk way. Stopping right in front of The Doctor, I accepted his challenge, "I think I will."

I stepped outside and was greeted by a very familiar sight. A beautiful gallery made of white and light brown, rectangle tile laid out in front of me. Simple but elegant. I stepped down the stairs
while looking around.

This experience suddenly became very real. *I'm actually here. I'm traveling with The Doctor! I'm not dreaming. I'm really doing this!* Excitement bubbled in my chest, nearly spilling over at the realization. It probably seems a little late for this "realization", but come on—would any Whovian really believe this was happening to them? I mean, I've gotten kidnapped by Koschei, taken to another dimension, almost died, and it was just now hitting me.

A large hand waved in my face. Attention caught, I stared into The Doctor's grey and blue eyes. He seemed worried.

I hummed in acknowledgement.

"You all right?" he asked, leaning in until he burst my personal bubble . . . again.

"I'm fine," I reassured. "I just amazed I'm here, that's all."

I watched his mouth curl into a grin and form words, though I barely heard what he said.

*I wonder what he tastes like. Or if he's a good kisser. Ten's a mind-blowing kisser, judging from Martha's reaction, but I don't know about Nine. I remember Rose being the only person he kissed, and he did it to save her life. What I do know is that he smells amazing—like leather, a newly opened book, and some heady musk that seems so familiar, but I can't name.*

Biting my lips to keep them from puckering and stiffening when I unconsciously shifted closer to The Doctor, I cut off my hormones and paid attention to what The Doctor was saying.

"Well, if that amazes you then you'll love this," the Doctor buzzed animatedly. He flicked his sonic at the wall; the wooden panels peeled away to reveal Earth and its sun.

Mouth falling open in a whisper of "Wow", I shuffled forward and pressed my hands to the warm glass.

The Doctor leaned against the wall beside the window and crossed his arms. "You people spend all your time thinkin' bout dying. Like you're goin' to get killed by eggs or beef or global warming or asteroids, but you never take time to imagine the impossible—that you survive. This is the year 5.5/Apple/26. Five billion years in your future. This is the day . . . hold on . . ." he broke off to look at his watch.

White-blue, yellow, orange, and red light burst out in vines and spheres from the sun. The light was almost too bright to watch. Without thinking, I finished The Doctor's sentence in a soft voice, not taking my eyes off the morbid yet magnificent sight glittering just outside.

"This is the day the sun expands. The end of the world."

"So . . . you're not impressed, then?" The Doctor grumbled dejectedly. He trudged ahead of me by a step, hunched over with his hands stuffed in his pockets.

Sighing, I tucked an unruly, dark brown curl of hair behind my ear for the umpteenth time. "I didn't say that. I'm just not surprised," I defended my reaction. "It's not my fault you're forgetting that I've already seen this adventure on the show."
The Doctor stopped pouting. He looked at me over his shoulder. A smug grin curled across his mouth. "So, you are impressed?"

Chuckles broke through my lips. Of course, he would deduce that. Oh well, I had already crushed his ego twice in the span of a few hours—why not encourage it for once?

Giving him a small smile, I gave The Doctor what he wanted, "Yes, I am very impressed."

His grin widened a fraction. "Knew it."

I rolled my eyes, still smiling. The man had too big an ego for one Time Lord. Though, I had to admit, The Doctor looked oh-so sexy when he had his ego stroked. With that thought, my eyes wandered down to his jean clad ass. Normally, I didn't look at a man's ass; I never saw the appeal before. I guess I could make an exception for The Doctor. I sighed woefully. *We all have our burdens to bear.*

The Doctor and I entered a larger observation room, this one done in darker wood paneling. Huge pillars lined each side of the room. Glittering chandeliers hung from the ceiling between each pillar. A vast window stretched from floor to ceiling and then became the ceiling. Mounted glass cases displayed several very different items.

The Doctor meandered over to the window while I was sidetracked. *That's weird.* I stared at an antique scroll. The scroll wasn't weird by itself. What was odd was that the flaking, silver writing covering the parchment from top to bottom.

"Of course. I bring you to the end of the world and you'd rather look at dusty, old artifacts," The Doctor huffed right next to me.

I twitched at his closeness. I nearly told him to back off but decided against it. Perhaps this was a test of will power. If it was, I wasn't going to be the first to give in.

"I've already watched the scene where you explain how you're not jumping in to save Earth. These artifacts were never explained. Ever! Can I be blamed for curiosity?" I mused.

He sighed but didn't sound disappointed. "No, you can't."

He let silence set in for a few seconds before asking, "Any questions I might be able to shed light on?"

"Maybe," I hummed. "If this is alien, then why does it look Japanese?"

"That's easy! Youkai crash landed in Japan before it had a language. They taught the natives their language to communicate," The Doctor explained.

I frowned. "I thought youkai were demons."

"Their quest to educate didn't end very well."

The Doctor apparently didn't care for answering any more questions, because he tugged me away from the displays and toward the window. We stood side by side and watched the sun flare up.

"Enough about those moldy, old things. What do you think of this?" The Doctor spread his arms, actively trying to convey his meaning.

I didn't respond right away. I merely stared out the window at the satellite surrounded Earth.
What did I think?

I thought the sight was beautiful. I thought it was chilling. I thought this whole thing was insane and wonderful and surreal all at once. I thought that me, standing here next to The Doctor was impossible and improbably, yet here I was, gazing out at my home planet and its glaring sun on a space station in the year 5.5/Apple/26.

I thought it was perfect.

Almost perfect.

Loneliness crept up the edges of the moment. Right now, at this point in time and space, I was the only "pure" human in existence. Being alone had never bothered me before, even when I first got dumped in this dimension I had soldiered on, never pausing to acknowledge my isolation. Now the insight threatened my stoniness.

Steeling myself, I met The Doctor's bright eyes with an answer. "It's perfect, Doctor. Thank you." My smile was a pathetic attempt at concealing my sadness.

The Doctor's grin faded. He started to question me but as interrupted by a new voice.

"Who the hell are you?"

We both jerked to face the new occupant of the room. A blue man in a robe colored dark copper glared at us.

The Doctor took the disturbance in stride, flashing another grin. "Oh! That's nice, thanks."

Poor man, he's going to die and I can't do a damn thing about it. I'd thought a lot about whom I could save and who I couldn't. Unfortunately, the Steward and The Moxx of Balhoon's deaths were out of my hands. Jabe, however, I could save. All I had to do was not get knocked out, kidnapped, and locked in that room to die.

Easy enough.

"But how did you get in? This is a maximum hospitality zone. The guests have disembarked! They're on their way any second now!" The Steward demanded frantically.

Maximum hospitality zone? Doesn't that mean we should be welcome? I pondered fruitlessly.

The Doctor rolled his eyes before presenting our alibi. "That's me. I'm a guest, look! I've got an invitation!" He fished out a plain wallet from his pocket and flipped it open for the blue man to analyze. "Look, there you see? It's fine, see? 'The Doctor plus one.' I'm The Doctor and this is Dahlia . . ." he trailed off and stared at me helplessly, realizing he didn't even know my last name, but then continued, "She's my plus one. Is that all right?"

"Well . . . obviously." The gears in the Steward's brain must have clogged because he simply blinked at us for several seconds. Then, the cogs started up again. "Apologies, etcetera. If you're onboard, we'd better start. Enjoy," he recited blandly, near sarcastically.

Grinning, The Doctor nodded at the Steward until he left. Once the Steward was gone, The Doctor flipped the blank paper inside the wallet towards me. He went to explain what it was, but I beat him to it.

"Psychic paper, shows people whatever you want them to see. Saves a lot of time. It can also
receive messages from people if they think hard enough," I said lightly, taking the wallet gently and examining it. I handed the wallet back with a bold, new message printed on the paper.

He did a double take before fully comprehending my message. Taken aback, he kept eye contact with me before finally shrugging and shoving the wallet back in his pocket.

I watched the doorway where the Steward had exited. "So," I started conversationally, "is he related to The Blue Man Group?"

The Doctor's eyes widened. "How did you know that? Wait—was that on the show, as well?"

I blinked rapidly to clear the astonishment from my mind. *Huh. Didn't expect that, though I probably should've.* "No, I was actually making a joke, but that's an interesting tidbit of info, Doc. Care to expand on it?" I drawled mercifully. The Doctor, upon hearing this was new information to me, seemed like he was going to burst if he didn't tell me everything he knew about The Blue Man Group and the Steward.

He threw another grin my way, "Gladly. It's a rather interesting story, too. Ya see, on their home planet the Blue People are all rather short. Being tall is a genetic mutation that rarely occurs—like extra fingers or toes in humans. While the few with the mutation aren't ridiculed or shunned by society for the most part, it's really hard living in a world where everything's too small. So, most affected leave the planet in search of a place where they don't stand out."

I only had one thought after The Doctor's lecture: How in the hell did he get that all out in one breath?

Before I could ask him, the Steward entered again.

"We have in attendance—The Doctor and Dahlia," he announced into a microphone. "Thank you! All staff to their positions." At the clapping of his hands, the staff, consisting of about a dozen tiny, blue people clad in black robes, scurried around from out of thin air. The Steward gave orders as they marched in lines out the glass doors and down the hallway: "Hurry now! Thank you—as quick as you can! Come along, come along!" Finally, the staff had left. "And now, might I introduce our next honored guest," continued the Steward. "Representing The Forest of Cheem, we have the trees. Namely, Jabe, Lute, and Coffa."

Two men followed a woman into the room. They actually reminded me of spriggans though without all the glowy bees and magic powers. I frowned to myself. *If Jabe is a tree, why does she have breasts? Do trees reproduce like mammals or do they use spores and seeds like other plants? Note—ask Doctor later.*

"There will be an exchange of gifts representing peace. If you can keep the room circulating, thank you," the Steward reminded.

The trees moved further into the room and started mingling as more guests arrived.

"Next, from the Solicitors Solco and Jolco, the Moxx of Balhoon."

The Doctor chuckled at my sour expression. "What? Don't like lawyers?"

I scrunched my nose at him. *No one like lawyers. Except other lawyers.*

He just grinned, turning back to the doorway.

A moving chair glided in with the Moxx of Balhoon sitting inside. I always wondered why he
wasn't wearing a shirt. Wasn't it rude to attend an event without one? Maybe not. We were five billion years in the future after all.

With my head in the clouds, I missed what the Steward said next. Wait... did he say *Repeated Mean* or *Repeated Meme*? Because they each give me very different mental images. I attempted to get The Doctor's attention, but he merely shushed me.

*Fine then, see if I ask you anymore questions,* I sulked, crossing my arms.

New aliens continued to enter despite my pouting. I was too busy plotting my revenge to notice. Jabe glided over to us. Well, she approached The Doctor. I was ignored. Her associates each carried trays covered in little plant shoots.

She took a plant in her hands and presented it to The Doctor. "The Gift of Peace," she sighed airily. "I bring you a cutting of my grandfather."

Taking the plant gingerly, The Doctor wondered at it for a moment and then handed it to me. I cradled the small pot like I expected it to bitch at me for holding it wrong.

"Thank you. Yes... Gifts... erm..." The Doctor noisily cleared his throat, nearly panicking as he patted down his pockets.

Jabe gazed at him expectantly.

Watching The Doctor squirm like that was way too entertaining, but it couldn't last. Even if he'd never be mine, I still didn't want to have to watch him flirt with Jabe. So, I cut in. "Doctor, why don't you ever remember? I told you I packed them before we left," I sighed with mock disappointment as I rummaged in the depths of my pack. I pulled out three holiday crackers and handed one to each of the trees.

The Doctor blinked. Amazement and fascination glowed in his eyes.

"They're holiday crackers." I gestured to the gift. "Two people each pull on one end of it until it explodes. The person with the larger half normally gets whatever's inside."

The trees retreated, inspecting their gifts with interest.

The Doctor quirked an eyebrow. "Holiday crackers? Why holiday crackers?"

"It's a celebration. Every celebration needs holiday crackers. Besides, at least I was prepared. You were floundering around like a fish out of water," I teased.

He frowned for a split second but soon replaced it with another smile. "Yeah, I was. Thanks for the save."

The tips of my years burned. Hoarsely, I replied, "No problem, Doctor—any time."

His gaze lingered on me even though I had turned back to the Steward.

"Sponsor of the main event, please welcome The Face of Boe," the Steward boomed, announcing the giant head rolling through the doors in his jar on wheels.

Resisting my urge to grin, I settled for discreetly staring at The Face of Boe. *Jack! I love Jack! But who doesn't love Jack? He should remember me, right? Should I talk to him?* I wondered, curiously tilting my head to the side and fixing my mint green eyes on Jack, following him as he
rolled around the room. I swear he winked at me briefly. A small smirk broke through my reserves. *Yep. Definitely going to talk to him.*

Warm breath tickled my ear. Startled, I jerked away and stared at the assailant. The Doctor blinked innocently. My ear felt cold.

I cleared my throat, "Yes, Doctor?"

"Interested in The Face of Boe, are we?"

I blinked and twisted my mouth into a frown. There was an edge to his tone, making the question seem like a demand. Raising my arms in surrender, I attempted to placate his anger (*Maybe he thinks I'm going to elope with Jack*), "Kind of . . . Yeah . . . I mean, he's a giant head in a jar with tentacles for hair—why wouldn't I be interested? God, Doctor, you're the one who said I shouldn't be blamed for curiosity," I huffed and glared, crossing my arms.

The Doctor deflated immediately, though it was barely noticeable, and cleared his throat. He shifted awkwardly and turned away from me, just in time to greet the next visitor.

"The Moxx of Balhoon," The Doctor said, forcing cheer.

"My felicitations on this historical happenstance. I give you the gift of bodily saliva," The Moxx squeaked before spitting.

Luckily, I was far enough away that the saliva hit my cheek instead of my eye. It was still disgusting.

The Moxx was given a holiday cracker by The Doctor, who explained what it was, and promptly jerked both sides until the novelty items spilled its contents in his lap. He unfolded the paper crown and placed it on his head before rolling away happily, giggling childishly as he did so.

The Adherents of the Repeated Mean (or Meme) approached next.

Wiping my face, I cautiously eyed the metallic sphere The Doctor was handed.

"A gift of peace in all good faith."

The Doctor took it, tossed it in the air once, caught it, and promptly tossed it to me. I immediately brought the ball as close to my face as possible to examine it, running my rather short nails over the almost smooth surface. Absentmindedly, I handed several crackers to The Doctor. I didn't expect to find an off switch. Cassandra may just be a flap of skin, but she wasn't stupid.

The Steward called out, "And last but not least, our very special guest. Ladies and gentlemen, and trees and multiforms, consider the earth below. In memory of this dying world, we call forth The Last Human."

Cassandra rolled through the doors in all her trampoline glory.

"The Lady Cassandra O'Brien Dot Delta Seventeen."

I decided to sneer briefly before turning my attention back to the metal sphere.

"Oh, now, don't stare. I know, I know it's shocking, isn't it? I've had my chin completely taken away and look at the difference! Look how thin I am," Cassandra giggled bubbly.

The Doctor chuckled softly.
"Thin and dainty," she continued, "I don't look a day over two thousand. Moisturize me, moisturize me." One of her white clad attendants sprayed her with something from a canister. "Truly, I am the last human."

The object I was grasping creaked as my grip tightened on it. A tick had probably appeared at my jaw by how hard my teeth were clenched. The Doctor glanced at me from the corner of his eye.

"My father was a Texan. My mother was from the Arctic Desert. They were born on Earth and were among the last to be buried in its soil." Her voice grated my nerves like a cheese grater on skin. I was trembling now, barely keeping my desire to throw the metal sphere at her, just to see if she'd rip in half. "I have come to honor them and . . ." Cassandra sniffled, like she was actually going to start crying, " . . . say goodbye. Oh, no tears." The other attendant dabbed her eyes. "No tears. I'm sorry, but behold! I bring gifts. From Earth itself—the last remaining ostrich egg."

Cassandra spoke as another staff member came in and displayed the egg on a pedestal. "Legend says it had a wingspan of fifty feet and blew fire from its nostrils. Or was that my third husband?"

I snorted. Either from the wrong facts or the pathetic joke, I didn't know.

"Who knows! Oh, don't laugh. I'll get laughter lines!" Cassandra giggled obnoxiously. She muttered to herself for several second and then introduced a jukebox, which was wheeled into the room. "And here, another rarity. According to the archives, this was called an iPod. It stores classical music from humanity's greatest composers. Play on!"

One of the staff who rolled it in pushed a button on the jukebox. A record fell into place. Tainted Love by Soft Cell filtered through the speakers.

I always thought the song was okay; I didn't enjoy it, didn't hate it. The Doctor seemed to enjoy it, though. He was bobbing his head in time to the music.

My grip on the orb finally slackened and my arm dropped limply to my side. I sighed heavily.

"Ever tried telling them they're wrong? The archeologists," I asked, genuinely curious. The Doctor smiled wryly. "Once . . . and I'll never do that again."

I smiled back and mocked, "Oh yes, because you're a Time Lord. You laugh at archeologists."

His chuckle sent shivers up and down my spine.

I guess I can forgive him—just this once, I thought, knowing this wouldn't be the only time I forgave this man.

"Refreshments will now be served. Earth death in thirty minutes," the Steward announced in closing.

This was the time when Rose—completely overwhelmed—had run from the room to have a panic attack. I, however, was completely calm; a little jittery from nerves, excitement, and leftover anger, but otherwise fine. I wasn't a child who needed a time out. I was a young woman who was new on the job. I'd settle in eventually, once I got into the groove of things.

Slipping the metal ball into my bag, I advanced toward Jack, not bothering to check The Doctor's reaction.

The Face of Boe watched me while I approached. He smiled.
"Hello, sir," I greeted.

Hmm . . . Why so formal, my dear? I agree it's been such a long time since we've last seen each other, but that's no reason not to greet me with an insult. A deep voice, Jack's voice, purred in my ear.

The familiarity he greeted me with shocked me, though it shouldn't have. "Sorry, this is the first time we've met for me. I might not be up to par with your memory," I apologized.

No need to apologize, Changeling, I understand. Your Doctor doesn't like to do things in order. I'm also curious as to where your other companion is. He's not going to cause trouble, is he? Jack's smirk formed in my mind while his mouth never moved.

"Changeling? Other companion? What're you talking about? And he's not 'my Doctor'. I refuse to be one of the women who try to possess him when I can't have him."

Jack laughed and chose to ignore my first two questions and tease me instead. Not yours yet you mean.

What? I mouthed silently.

What I mean is that you don't realize you already own his ass. The signs are so obvious, or so you told me when we met.

"When we met?" No way. No way was I and The Doctor together when we met Jack. There was no way we were together at all. My pulse quickened with anticipation.

Jack replied in a satisfied tone. Before, actually. You two had been together for a short while before that. Now that I've seen it for myself, I can't believe you never noticed. The Doctor's being obvious in his attraction.

"He-he's not attracted to me," I protested weakly.

I can see why he is. You're very beautiful. Dark curly hair, intelligent green eyes, great figure, perfect height to tuck under his chin and protect, and that's not even adding your personality.

He was teasing me now. His tone said it all, but my cheeks flushed all the same. "He can't like me like that."

You still doubt my intuitive prowess. Tell me then—why not?

My mouth twisted into a grimace. "He likes blondes," I said scathingly. "Bubbly blondes who need to be protected and led. I don't need to be protected. I won't be led. And I am most certainly not blonde."

All of that is true, but The Doctor loves those things about you, Jack countered. I believe what he said was "She blasted into my life one day and I couldn't take my eyes off her after that".

I gnawed on my lip; the pain kept me from doing something stupid.

"Earth death in twenty minutes. Earth death in twenty minutes," a robotic, female voice informed over the intercom.

It's all right to be nervous, but you shouldn't be. Everything will fall into place. You just need to be yourself.
Platform One rumbled and shook, tilting me off kilter for a second or two. Right after it passed, the Steward reported over the com, "Honored guests may be reassured that gravity pockets may cause slight turbulence."

"What if I mess something up, Jack?" I fretted. "Now that you've told me, I could—"

*Nothing is going to change, Changeling. You're going to be with The Doctor for a very long time,* he soothed. *You also shouldn't worry about Bad Wolf or Canary Wharf.*

Guilt and sorrow overcame me. Jack. Poor, poor Jack. To set everything right, I'd have to bring him back to life. He'd never be able to die. He would be miserable and jaded for the rest of his life.


He cut me off quickly but not unkindly. *Shush, sweetheart, you've apologized enough to me over the years. I'm tired of hearing them.*

I gave him a small smile. "Thank you, Jack."

Jack grinned for real this time. *You're welcome, Changeling.*

"Will I get to talk to you again before you leave?" I asked, removing my hand from his tank.

*You may speak to me whenever you wish.*

I smiled again, wider this time, and started back to The Doctor.

*Oh, and Dahlia.*

I paused to look at him over my shoulder.

*You'll be happy to know I won't have any hot water for the entirety of my stay here.*

I grinned that time. Another person saved.
The Doctor hurried me over to a panel on the wall and removed it from its place. He spoke while he fiddled with the wires inside, "That wasn't a gravity pocket. I know gravity pockets, and they don't feel like that." He crossed a red wire with an orange one, causing a spark to singe his fingers.

I watched Jabe approach from the corner of my eye.

"What do you think, Jabe? Listen to the engines—they pitched up about thirty hertz, is that dodgy or what?" The Doctor asked the tree without looking up from his work.

Jabe gave him a self-disapproving smile. "It's the sound of metal. It doesn't make any sense to me."

He frowned at her, eyes flickering to me for a second and then back to her. "Where's the engine room?"

"I don't know . . . but the maintenance duct is just behind our guest suite, I could show you . . . and your—"

I cut her off, "Let's get a few things straight before you start assuming things. I am not his wife, nor am I his partner, concubine, escort, or prostitute." Pausing to glare at her, I continued, "I'm his friend and companion. And even if you're attempting to flirt with him, that's no reason to ignore or insult me." I clasped my hands together behind my back and locked eyes with The Doctor. He looked . . . Intrigued? . . . Puzzled? I couldn't tell. It could've been both; it could've been neither. I broke eye contact with him.

"Well," I said, not staring at either of them for very long. "I'll leave you two to . . . pollinate, or whatever it is you'll be doing. I am going to resume my conversation with Mr. Boe over there."

With that adieu, I spun on my heel and left, calling over my shoulder, "See you later, Doc."

"Earth death in fifteen minutes. Earth death in fifteen minutes." The computer's voice echoed ominously through the room.

"Hello dear," Cassandra said as I passed. I stopped and, swallowing my pride, greeted her with a strained smile, "Hello, Miss O'Brien."

She giggled. "Oh please, call me Cassandra."

I nodded and attempted to sneak away, but Cassandra didn't stay quiet like she was supposed to.

"Such a pity, isn't it?" Cassandra sighed dejectedly, gazing out the viewing window at Earth.

"No, fuck this. I am done. I am fucking done. I will not stand here and listen to this bitchy skin flap. "Cut the shit, Cassandra," I snapped. "I can see right through that act of yours."

She blinked blankly at me, but I saw the spark of realization in her eyes.

"What do you mean, dear?"
I scoffed, "Oh please, you're so fake and plastic, Barbie's jealous. You don't care about Earth dying. This is just another appearance to show off how hideous your last procedure made you."

Cassandra looked positively aghast. Then, she turned furious. "Never in my life have I heard—"

"Sure, you have. You just chose not to listen." I face her and gave her a look filled with as much condescension and thinly veiled patience that I could muster into it. "Face it, Cassandra—your fifteen minutes are up."

By the time I'd finished with Cassandra, Jack had left the room.

*Maybe he went to his suite,* I thought.

After getting directions from a few of the staff, I cautiously made my way through the hallways. Several corners later, I found my path blocked by two of the Adherents. I quickly turned back the way I had come, only to see the other two Adherents.

*Shit* was the last thought I had before I was knocked unconscious.

I woke up to Britney Spears' *Toxic* shrieking in my ears. Not that I didn't like the song or anything. I actually enjoyed it from time to time but right now, all the high notes were just making my headache worse.

I groaned and shoved myself into a kneeling position. I couldn't lie around! The sun filter was going to start descending soon! I needed to get out! Sure, The Doctor would save me, but Jabe would still die. I had resolved to stop her death a long time ago and wouldn't be stopped now.

I stumbled to the door and, when it didn't immediately open, attempted to pry it apart with my fingers. Obviously, that method didn't work. I needed a better idea—or any idea, really. I paced furiously while thinking.

Up and down the steps, to each and every corner, from wall to wall, I paced so vigorously my feet started aching.

Then it hit me like a rock to the face.

I scuttled to my bag and ripped it open, and then I searched for the object that would solve all my problems. *Stupid fuckers,* I thought triumphantly. *They should've taken my bag.* Why hadn't I thought of this sooner as a backup plan? I had already found out the laser screwdriver was equipped with an actual laser; I could use it to cut through the door!

Cool metal connected with my palm. I wrenched my arm out of the bag and faced the sealed doors. Dumping my pack on the floor, I ordered the laser, "Setting 63." The laser whirred and clicked three times. Then, the tip sparked brightly. I pointed the screwdriver at the top of the seam of the doors, mentally ordering it to fire. A beam of concentrated heat burst from the end and hit right where it was aimed. Liquid metal dripped from that spot as the beam worked its technological magic.

"Earth death in ten minutes."
Goddamn intercom, always raining on my parade. I had about a minute or two before the sun filter started descending.

Halfway down, I heard footsteps. Whoever the feet belonged to stopped outside the door.

"Hello? Who's in there?" a man asked.

"Doctor!" I exclaimed. "The Adherents knocked me out and locked me in here. I'm getting the doors open, but the sun filter's going to descend soon. See if you can't get ahead of—"

"Sun filter descending. Sun filter descending."

*Shit. Too late.*

"Doctor, hurry!" I urged, panic bubbling in my chest.

"I'm on it!" he barked.

I examined the door again. Three fourths finished. I just needed a bit more time . . . A glance upwards told me I didn't have it.

"Sun filter descending. Sun filter descending."

"Doctor!" I was crouching now, still using the laser. Searing golden light blazed barely a foot above my head.

"I know!" The Doctor growled. Probably through gritted teeth.

"Sun filter rising. Sun filter rising."

"Don't let your guard down, Doctor," I called out, not moving from my position on the floor.

"Sun filter rising . . . Sun filter descending."

I heard The Doctor curse. "This is just what we need. The computer's getting clever," he spat.

"Stop your bitching and keep working!" I shrieked at him.

"I'm not bitchin'! It's fightin' back!"

My heart was pounding so quickly and harshly I felt it was going to give out; my palms were slick with sweat; my jaw ached from being clenched so long. The burning light was so close now I could feel it on top of my head. I could smell a few strands of my hair that were too frizzy to stick in place being singed. The stench made my stomach twist.

*Please-please-please-please . . .*

"Sun filter rising. Sun filter rising."

I slumped wearily and sighed heavily before examining my work: A hole had been completely melted through the doors because I hadn't moved the screwdriver and a glowing, white hot line traced where the doors met.

"Doctor?" I panted, "Doctor, can you get the doors open?"

*Please let it have worked . . .*
"I'm not . . . Wait! Yes! You completely melted the locks! This'll only take a second or two!"

Collapsing, I was happy to wait and catch my breath, but I was forgetting something. What was it? When I rested my hand on the floor, the laser screwdriver clacked against the wood.

Shit! I couldn't let The Doctor see it! He would ask questions—questions I couldn't answer! Lunging for my bag, I managed to shove the screwdriver inside just as the doors swooshed open.

The Doctor rushed in first, followed by Jabe. He peeled me off the floor and hugged me tightly to his chest.

"Doctor?" I asked quietly, stunned by the sudden affection.

"I thought I was going to lose you," he said, his voice muffled by my hair.

I stiffened. He sounded so distraught, like he didn't believe he'd get to me in time. Hesitantly, I wrapped my arms around his larger frame. His grip on me tightened.

"Sshhh . . . It's all right, Doctor. You saved me just like I knew you would. There's no need to go all gloomy on me," I soothed awkwardly, petting his back through the thick leather of his jacket.

I felt him smile against my hair. "I'm not bein' gloomy—just relieved," he said, snuggling even closer to me, if that were possible.

I stopped myself. He is not snuggling me. No matter how much it feels like it.

Deciding not to stress over The Doctor's behavior, I relaxed into his embrace and enjoyed it, reveling in his mind-fogging scent.

The Doctor seemed to enjoy this, because he started humming a nameless tune and stroking my spine.

The computer interrupted the moment: "Earth death in five minutes."

Shit. I'd completely forgotten. Slowly, I peeled myself away from The Doctor and looked at his confused expression. "Doctor . . . the station . . ." I attempted to explain. He caught on to my meaning quickly; letting out a soft, sharp "Oh!" However, he didn't release me when he came to this realization.

"Doctor," I tried again. This time, I let my arms fall to my sides and out half a foot of distance between us. That got his attention.

"Oh," he mumbled dejectedly, shuffling away from me.

I winced. It felt like I was rejecting him after he'd asked me out.

To assure him I wasn't in any way rejecting his affection, I took his hand to lead him toward the door. "Come on," I said, "We've got a space station to save."

He perked up immediately, following me to the door.

I paused for a second to grab my bag and sling it over my shoulder. The next second both of us were running down the hall to the Manchester Suite.
When we entered the Manchester Suite, Jabe was telling the other alien guests that Platform One had been infiltrated by the spiders.

_Speaking of spiders,_ I thought and searched my bag for the sphere I'd placed in there earlier. I was surprised to find the metal ball still in its original form and not a clinking spider.

Cassandra interrupted my contemplation: "How's that possible? Our private rooms are protected by a code wall. Moisturize me, moisturize me."

I followed The Doctor, standing at his right while Jabe stood at his left. He asked me, "Dahlia, can I borrowed that?"

I shrugged. "Sure, you'll have to activate it, though."

He grinned, taking the ball from me and then slipping the sonic from his pocket. He activated the sonic. A high-pitched buzzing filled my ears; after only a few seconds, the ball transformed into a spider.

Cassandra screamed, "That's a spider device! Kill it!"

The Moxx of Balhoon cut in. "Summon the Steward!"

Jabe shook her head sadly. "I'm afraid the Steward is dead."

"Who killed him?" Moxx asked in a shocked tone.

"This whole event was sponsored by the Face of Boe! He invited us!" Cassandra accused while Jack shook his head. "Talk to the face! Talk to the face!"

"Shut up, skin flap," I said.

"Easy way of finding out. Someone brought a little pet on board," The Doctor piped up. He set the spider on the ground. "Let's send him back to Master."

At first the spider didn't seem to know where to go; it just stared at Cassandra. She twitched (as much as a piece of skin can twitch) suspiciously, but the spider passed her by to stand in front of the Adherents of the Repeated Mean (Meme?).

Cassandra was once again the first to indict. "The Adherents of the Repeated Meme! J'accuze!"

The Doctor rolled his eyes and strolled over to the Adherents. "That's all very well, and really kind of obvious, but if you stop and think about it . . . " One of the Adherents attempted to hit him, but he just nonchalantly ripped its arm off. "A repeated meme is just an idea. And that's all they are. An idea." He ripped a wire out of the arm; the Adherents crumpled into a pile of black robes.

While everyone else gasped in shock, Cassandra merely rolled her eyes.

The Doctor kept his cool and explained, "Remote controlled droids—nice little cover for the real trouble maker. Go on, Jimbo." Gently, he nudged "Jimbo" with his foot. "Go home."

The spider skittered over to Cassandra. She sneered, first at her robot, then at The Doctor. "I bet you were the school swot and never got kissed," she spat.

The Doctor smirked. "What are you going to do, moisturize me?" he mocked, chuckling.

"With acid," Cassandra snarled. "Oh, too late anyway. My spiders have control of the mainframe."
Oh, you carried them as gifts, tax free, past every code wall. I'm not just a pretty face."

"Sabotaging a ship while you're still inside it? How stupid is that?" The Doctor snorted.

"I had hoped to manufacture a hostage situation with myself as one of the victims. The compensation would have been enormous."

The Doctor said bitterly, "Five billion years and it still comes down to money."

"Do you think it's cheap, looking like this? Flatness costs a fortune. I am The Last Human, Doctor. Me—not that freaky little kid of yours," Cassandra said, glaring at me.

The Moxx of Balhoon spoke up, "Arrest her!"

Cassandra responded dully, not the least bit intimidated, "Oh, shut it, pixie. I've still got my final option."

"Earth death in three minutes," echoed the computer.

"And here it comes," Cassandra chirped. "You're just as useful dead, all of you. I have shares in our rival companies and they'll triple in price as soon as you're dead. My spiders are primed and ready to destroy the safety systems. How did that old Earth song go? 'Burn, baby, burn.'"

"Then you'll burn with us," Jabe said calmly. My respect for her rose a few points at how easy she made not panicking look.

"Oh, I'm so sorry." Cassandra giggled. "I know the use of teleportation is strictly forbidden, but . . . I'm such a naughty thing. Spiders, activate!"

A series of explosions thundered from all corners of the ships, swiftly followed by the spider in front of Cassandra self-destructing.

Cassandra continued as if she hadn't decided to murder everyone onboard, "Force field's gone with the planet about to explode. At least it'll be quick—just like my fifth husband." She snickered nastily. "Oh, shame on me. Buh-bye, darlings! Buh-bye, darlings!" she called out while she and her bodyguards flickered out of sight via teleporter.

The PA system clicked on again. "Heat levels rising."

"Reset the computer!" The Moxx demanded.

"Only the Steward would know how," Jabe said.

I beat The Doctor in speaking his thoughts. "No, we'll do it by hand. Doctor, there must be a system switch."

He nodded and marched toward the doors. "Dahlia, Jabe, with me. You lot—just chill!" he ordered as he left the room.

I stopped Jabe from following. She looked at me questioningly. "Stay here. The heat levels will burn you alive. You need to stay here and help the others. Try and keep behind the pillars as much as possible. Maybe even move to a room without windows," I ordered, side stepping to the door.

"Earth death in two minutes. Earth death in two minutes."

She nodded in understanding and shoved me toward the door.
I took off down the hall, desperately trying to remember to breathe through my nose and find The Doctor.

I nearly dashed by the ventilation chamber. I would've passed it but I saw a leather jacket flutter inside.

I skidded to a halt right behind The Doctor, who was staring hopelessly at the whirling fans.

"Heat levels critical. Heat levels critical."

I spotted the reset lever on the far wall and spat out a curse for whoever designed this place. "Who looked at the blue prints and said 'Oh! We'll put the lifesaving reset lever on the far wall with some big ass fans in front of it! That's a fantastic use of my degree!' Fuck them," I grumbled under my breath.

The Doctor gave me a weak smile that came out as a grimace.

"Heat levels rising. Heat levels rising."

He pulled down the lever beside us and watched the fans slow down. He released the lever; the fans immediately sped up.

I snatched the lever and jerked it down—and almost let it go. I probably should've thought that through, I groaned internally.

"External temperature five thousand degrees."

"Doctor, you better haul ass across that walkway, because this thing's heavy as a mother fucker," I panted.

The Doctor beamed and rushed to the fans.

"Heat levels rising. Heat levels rising."

"Yeah, I fucking know that, you shitty alarm. Why don't you start doing something useful—like shutting the hell up?" I growled through gritted teeth. Cussing the intercom out wouldn't do any good, but it kept me concentrated on holding the lever—not my hands, which were crackling and searing between the mix of intense heat and the metal bar I had a death grip on.

"Heat levels hazardous. Heat levels hazardous."

"Oh, fuck you."

The Doctor finally dodged the first fan's blades. He skittishly stared at the next.

"Shields malfunctioning. Shields malfunctioning."

The heat was taking its toll. I was drenched in sweat and my arms were quivering with the force I was exerting to keep the lever down.

The Doctor glanced back over his shoulder at me. A panicked look crossed his face.

"Heat levels rising. Heat levels rising."

"Doctor, if you hurry and reset the system, I'll kiss you." I called out my bribe weakly.
I must've faded out for a few seconds because the next thing I knew, The Doctor was at my side, saying my name, and the room was cooling rapidly.

Blinking spots from my eyes, I breathed in deeply to get as much oxygen as I could. I briefly registered The Doctor attempting to gently pry my hands off the lever. I relaxed my nearly numb hands. It took several seconds to separate my hands from the level, seeing as now they were now sticky and slightly crunchy. Sparks of pain raced through my fingers and palms as the blood attempted to flow through them again.

At first, I didn’t want to take in the damage, but The Doctor's strangled cry made me curious.

Unfortunately, I was too exhausted to react to seeing that both of my palms were a mixture of charred black and blistered, bleeding red welts. A clear, sticky mucus was seeping through the cracks, attempting to soothe some of the injury but failing.

That's bad, I thought blankly. "That's bad, right Doctor?" I needed him to confirm what my fogged brain suspected.

"Yeah . . . Yeah, that's bad," he choked out, reaching for my hands and gently taking them in his larger, rougher ones. "God, Dahlia, I'm so sorry. I-I should've—"

I wobbled side to side, but still commanded firmly, "Sh . . . Shut up, Doctor. We . . . we'll ta-lk later. Right now . . . get me some water." I motioned to my bag; it had been carelessly dropped on the floor once again. I needed to take better care of it.

He obeyed without question and soon held an open bottle of water to my lips. I tried to control how fast I drank, but I really didn't care if I puked. I was just so thirsty.

The Doctor carelessly tossed the bottle away when it was empty. "How are you feeling?"

I swallowed. "Better." And I really was. I could think clearer now and I wasn't about to collapse. Though the bad outweighed the good; my whole body was shaking, my hands were starting to sting, my lungs burned, my throat and mouth felt like sandpaper, and I just wanted to sleep.

The Doctor frowned, his expression saying he didn't believe me. I didn't blame him.

"I'll take you back to the TARDIS. Get your hands started healing," he mumbled more to himself than to me.

"No," I refused.

He shook his head, "You need medical treatment."

"I know that, but first we need to finish with Cassandra. You can doctor me all you want afterwards," I finalized.

The Doctor slumped in defeat. "Fine, but you're not walking."

"Wha—"

After slinging my bag over his shoulder, he gathered me up bridal style. I squeaked and slung my arms around his neck, clutching at him with my forearms and elbows since my hands were out of commission.

"Hold on," he said and ran down the halls as fast as he could.
The Doctor set me down next to Jabe when she met us at the door. I surveyed the damage around the room. Fires were being put out; blue people were cleaning Jack's tank; others were standing around the Moxx of Balhoon's chair, mourning over the pile of dust that now sat there. Guilt nipped at my guts even though I knew I couldn't ensure his safety.

Jabe followed my line of sight and looked at the ground. She wrung her hands together and cleared her throat. "The Moxx could not be saved," she confirmed sadly.

"I know," I whispered roughly. Then, I turned back to The Doctor. The anger on his face made me shudder. This was nothing like when I first met him; the barely controlled fury blazing right beneath his skin and behind his eyes frightened me. I wouldn't deny that.

This was The Oncoming Storm.

Jabe lightly touched The Doctor's arm. "Are you all right?"

"Oh, I'm full of ideas. Bristling with 'em!" he snapped. "Idea number one. Teleportation through five thousand degrees needs some sort of feed." He marched over to the displayed ostrich egg. "Idea number two. This feed must be hidden nearby." He smashed the fake egg without a second thought, revealing the device inside. "Idea number three. If you're as clever as me, then a teleportation feed can be reversed." He twisted the device's dial.

Cassandra faded back into view. She hadn't noticed and continued her chattering. "Oh, you should've seen their little alien faces—all helpless and bleating and—" She finally stopped to realize where she was. "Oh . . ."

The Doctor sneered. "The Last Human."

Cassandra frantically attempted to lie, "So, you passed my little test. Bravo! This makes you eligible to join . . . um . . . the Human Club—"

"Come on Cassandra, do you really think we'll believe that pathetic excuse? You can do better than that," I said.

"People have died, Cassandra," The Doctor seethed. "You murdered them."

"It depends on your definition of people," Cassandra threw out carelessly.

Bad move.

"And that's enough technicality to keep you lawyer dizzy for centuries. Take me to court, Doctor, and witness the effect of beauty upon the legal system. Oh, I will dazzle them! Charm the sternest jury, seduce the stiffest judge." Could she even have sex? She didn't have the bits and pieces other women did.

I wrinkled my nose and sharply shook my head in an attempt to banish the mental images now assaulting my brain. Eugh! That's disgusting! I don't want to visualize that!

Cassandra continued, "You stand in court and watch me smile and cry and flutter—"

"And creak?" The Doctor cut her off.

Cassandra hastily asked, "And what?" She was confused, much like everyone else in the room except me and The Doctor.
"Creak—you're creaking."

"What?"

Now everyone could hear the sound. No one could deny that Cassandra was indeed creaking.

I set my mouth in a firm line as I watched her start to panic.

"I'm drying out! Oh, sweet heavens, moisturize me, moisturize me! Where are my surgeons, my lovely boys? It's too hot!" she wailed pathetically.

"You raised the temperature," The Doctor smirked, basking in Cassandra's anguish.

I swallowed thickly. Should I help? Cassandra deserved to die. I hated her. The Doctor hated her. Everyone on Station One hated her. She'd murdered innocent people. But the question wasn't if I should help; it was could I stomach the feeling afterwards.

"Oh, dear God, have pity! Moisturize me! I'm too dry, oh Doctor—I'll do anything, please, I'm sorry!"

I may hate Cassandra, and she was a horrible person, but I couldn't just stand by and watch her die. The Doctor didn't need a companion who wouldn't tell him when to stop. He needed someone who would draw a line and tell him when he'd crossed it. I had to be that person.

"Doctor, help her." It was supposed to be an order, but my voice was too soft, too shaky, and too unsure.

"Everything has its time. And everything dies," he growled at me.

"Yes, it does, but nothing gives you the right to dictate who lives and who dies," I bit back.

He looked back at me, subtly relaxing, and seemed to think my words over.

Cassandra's agonized scream brought us back to the situation at hand. "I'm too young! I'm too young!" she shrieked. Holes split her too thin flesh. More and more appeared until Cassandra split apart and exploded. Pieces of her flew to all sides of the room.

"Shuttles four and six departing. This unit now closing down for maintenance. Closing down."

I ignored the computer and stared out the window at the floating chunks of rock, cradling my stinging hands close to my chest.

The sound of wheels rolling closer, followed by footsteps, made me perk from my brooding; a deep voice greeted me. *Hello, Dahlia.*

I turned around and smiled sadly. "Hey, Ja—" Then I noticed someone else was with him. "I mean, Boe."

Both males laughed. Or, I assumed the newcomer was a male. He looked like a human man in a clean-cut suit, but his entire head was covered with an odd interpretation of a black motorcycle helmet.

"It's all right. You can call him Jack around me. I know all about his past, who he really is, and
who you and The Doctor are," Mystery Man reassured, reaching out his hand.

Smiling weakly, I held up my hands for his inspection. “Sorry, can’t really, you know . . .”

“Holy shit!” the man exclaimed, dropping his head and taking a step back. “What the hell happened? Why haven’t you been treated yet?”

“We were a bit busy with Cassandra. Don’t worry, The Doctor will take care of it when we leave,” I said, pursing my lips as I thought. "I'm sorry, I don't know you. Do we meet in my future?"

He chuckled again, "Yes, we do, and I have to say, I'm very glad we did. If it weren't for you, I'd be dead."

I blinked. Wow. I'd saved his life? But who was he? Someone from an episode I'd forgotten? "What's your name? Maybe it'll jog my memory if I knew it."

Mystery Man shook his helmeted head. "Sorry, I can't tell you. If you knew, something might go wrong. You understand."

I nodded. Of course, I did.

Mystery Man shuffled a bit. I felt his smile even though I couldn't see it. "Well, I'll leave you two to it, then." He stroked Jack's tank lovingly. "I'll wait outside." And then he left.

Jack chuckled at my surprised expression. You should close your mouth, Changeling. The Doctor might take advantage of it.

I snapped my mouth shut. My cheeks burned. "Shut up, Jack."

Never. We both know you enjoy hearing me talk.

A real smiled graced my lips this time. "So, what did you want to talk about?" I asked, suddenly nervous.

More like reassure you that you shouldn't be afraid of the future. And to also thank you, since I haven't had the chance to—in either of our time streams. While my life has been anything but perfect, you saved me from destroying myself. Changeling, you forced me to see that I couldn't run from my problems, because if I did, they'd come back a whole lot worse. Thanks to you, I'm not half as jaded as I could be. Jack paused to let this sink in.

"I-I don't understand, Jack. What're you talking about?" I scrambled for something—anything—to say. "You gotta help me out here, Jack. I'm grasping at straws."

He chuckled. Don't worry. In the future, you'll understand better than I ever will. Right now, though, all you need to focus on is making sure The Doctor understands.

"Understands what?" I pouted. Why did everyone always think that just because I knew a lot of shit about this universe that I should know every little allusion they shove my way?

You already know, so don't try and play dumb. Just think about it for a while, after you've had some rest. It'll come to you.

A heavy sigh deflated me. I chuckled pitifully. "Thanks, Jack, I feel so much better now."

He winked. You'd feel even better if you just jumped The Doctor. He wouldn't mind, and you both could release so much tension. I suggest just stripping down and—
"I'll see you later, Jack!" I interrupted when my ears started burning.

Jack laughed and said his goodbye as well, leaving me to my silent brooding once again.

Of course, my moping session didn't last long, because The Doctor was at the door now, leaning against the frame.

I sighed, "The earth's gone—wiped out in a fiery explosion, but no one watched. We were all too busy saving ourselves. All of the history, gone in a ball of flame, and no one saw."

"Come with me," he said and held out his hand.

I held out my own for him to cautiously grip by the wrist. The Doctor silently led me back to the TARDIS.

A minute or two later, The Doctor and I were standing on the streets of Cardiff, watching the people pass by.

"You think it's going to last forever," The Doctor said quietly while he looked at the ground. "People and cars and concrete. But it won't. One day—it's gone, even the sky." He paused, to see if I had anything to say.

"You don't have to say anything else if you don't want to. I already know what happened," I interjected, giving him an out if he wanted it.

He cleared his throat, "I know." He inhaled deeply to steel his nerves. "My planet's gone. It's dead. It burnt like the earth. It’s just rocks and dust. Before its time."

"I'm sorry," I said quietly. And I was. The Doctor didn't deserve the torment that had been brought upon him.

"There was a war," he continued. "The Time War. And we lost."

One man shouldn't contain that much grief. It was just wrong. I tried to blink away my tears, but they just overflowed anyway.

"I'm a Time Lord. I'm the last of the Time Lords. They're all gone. I'm the only survivor. I've been traveling on my own ever since."

Some of his lines had changed. He didn't say he was alone; he said he had been alone. He was accepting me as a companion. I smiled despite my sorrow.

"I'm glad you're accepting the fact that you won't be getting rid of me any time soon." I looked up at him.

He pursed his lips. "Are you sure that's what you want?"


I snorted in amusement while he chuckled.

"Come on, we'll get chips," he said.

I shook my head, "Nah, not in the mood for fries. I know this great pizza place that delivers. Besides, I can't exactly eat anything until my hands are fixed." I nodded at my curled appendages.
That got The Doctor worried. "God! How could I forget? Bloody hell, why didn't you remind me earlier instead of letting me witter on?"

He tugged open the TARDIS doors. "First, I'll patch ya up, and then we'll get pizza."

I grinned and shrugged. "Whatever you say, Doctor."
The Doctor led me through the corridors of the TARDIS. We passed hundreds of doors—some were plain metal, others were a wild array of different colors and styles—but stopped at a plain white one. The Doctor hit an access pad to the left, causing the door to slide open, and walked inside. He motioned for me to follow.

I did so and was nearly blinded by the sheer brightness of the room. Every surface was spotless. Every bit of equipment glittered in artificial light. Even the air was sterile and cold.

After I adjusted, I was free to examine the room. It looked like a regular hospital but with unfamiliar and more advanced technology.

"Sit down." The Doctor motioned to one of the examination tables at one side of the room.

Sitting down, I watched him bustle around. He found what he was looking for, a large clear tube, in a chrome cabinet and quickly walked back to my side. He fumbled with the cap; I snickered quietly and played innocent when he looked at me. Displaying my palms, I waited for him to spread whatever was in the tube on them. Finally, The Doctor opened the cap and applied the cool gel.

As soon as the colorless goo was applied, it shifted to a pale purple. Tingles prickled my skin. I blinked in amazement. Now that was cool. I looked back at the medicine tube to see what it was called. Gallifreyan symbols stopped my curiosity in its tracks.

"Heh," I grinned. "I don't suppose you'll teach me Gallifreyan."

The Doctor looked back at me nervously. "Um . . . Sorry . . . but, um . . . No, I'm afraid not."

I laughed. "Don't worry, Doctor. I didn't think so."

Grinning, he recapped the tube and set it aside.

"So, um, how long is this stuff supposed to take?" I asked impatiently. I was starving, and I really wanted that pizza.

"About thirty, maybe forty-five, minutes," he answered, pulling up a rolling stool to sit on. "I thought we could talk while your hands healed. Ya know, get to know each other better."

I shrugged. "All right, but I'm not good at just rambling on about myself. Why don't you just ask questions, and I'll try my best to answer them?" I suggested.

"Fine by me. Let's start with your full name."

"Dahlia Fae Tombew."

The Doctor quirked an eyebrow. "Tombew? That's a rather odd name."

I smirked. "Odder than The Doctor?"

He chuckled, "You win that one. How old are? When were you born? Where are you from?"

Of course, he would spout off several questions at once. "I'm nineteen. I was born on March 15th, and I'm from Silas, Alabama."
"You don't have much of an accent," he commented.

I brushed it off. "I've never had much of an accent, and living in the UK hasn't helped."

The Doctor nodded. "Tell me about your family."

Ah . . . Should've known he'd ask about them. Truth was, I didn't know what to say about my family. Hell, the only time I'd actually thought about them was during the first month in this dimension when Ashley and Jackie wouldn't stop bitching about how a teenage girl shouldn't be alone in a foreign country.

Looking down at my lap, I pretended to be consumed with my healing hands.

The Doctor stayed silent; he merely sat and waited for me to start.

Sighing, I finally caved, "Both my parents are still married. I've got a sister who's five years older than me and a brother who's two years younger than me. We also have three cats. Aaand . . . that's about it."

He frowned. "That can't be all. Did you all get along? Who were you closest to? Did your brother bother you more than your sister did? Are you a daddy's girl? How large was your house? What did your parents do for a living? What were your cats' names?"

I tried to block out his questions. I didn't want to talk about my family; couldn't he see that? Of course, he couldn't. He was being oblivious again.

Irritation swelled in my chest. Why wouldn't he shut up?

"Doctor," I snarled.

My outburst surprised him; his mouth gaped open while no sound came out. He looked ready to ask what was wrong, but his jaw clicked shut when it dawned on him. Swallowing, The Doctor kept eye contact for barely a second before breaking it.

"Sorry," he muttered.

Silence overtook us. The humming of the TARDIS soothed my temper, and I regretted how I'd snapped at him. He understood; there was no reason to get pissed off.

Taking a deep, shaky breath, I managed to get out what needed to be said: "I . . . I haven't mourned or cried for my family at all since I was brought here."

The Doctor said nothing.

"I feel like the worst person in the world, because . . . shouldn't I have reacted? Shouldn't I feel something?" My voice had risen to shouting now. "Why don't I feel anything, Doctor? Why? I'm not sad or angry—there's barely any home sickness! Did I lose my humanity when I came here?" I was crying now, full out sobbing and choking on my words.

The Doctor pulled me into a hug. During my rant, he'd moved from his stool to sit beside me on the examining table.

"No, no, you didn't. You never could, you wonderful woman," The Doctor whispered rapidly. "There's nothing wrong with you or what you're feeling."

I sobbed something into his shirt that even I didn't understand.
The Doctor continued like he hadn't heard, "I just hope your numb period isn't as long as mine was."

I shifted away from his comfort just long enough to ask, "Numb period?"

He stroked my arm, humming in acknowledgement. "It's the time after a tragedy when nothin' feels out of place or you're just in denial. Some have it and some don't. For some people, it might take a week to clear up, for others—maybe years." He shifted a bit—only a bit—just enough to stroke my cheek with the back of his knuckles. "I was in denial, and it was such a deep denial that—for nearly a year—I made excuse after excuse for the emptiness I felt in my mind. I stayed inside the TARDIS and monitored nonexistent wavelengths and frequencies. I deluded myself into believin' that there had to be at least one other Time Lord out there."

Sniffing, I carefully rubbed at my drying eyes. "What happened?" I asked, clearing my throat.

"One day, an ordinary day just like all the rest, somethin' in me broke, and everythin' I'd been holdin' back—all the sadness and guilt—flooded," The Doctor finished quietly.

I'd finally calmed down enough to process everything The Doctor had said. No—wait . . . I couldn't just say he said; The Doctor had just spilled part of his soul to me. He told me something no other companion had ever heard.

Pride overwhelmed my depression until all I felt was the need to comfort this man, this tortured, fantastic man.

I interlocked our left hands. "Oh, Doctor . . ." I sighed pityingly.

We were both silent for a while, purely basking in each other’s company and the realization that we had something in common, even if it was a horrible something.

Of course, The Doctor always hated silence, no matter how companionable.

"Sorry, got all gloomy on you," The Doctor apologized, laughing nervously. "So, uh," he unwrapped himself from around me. He seemed to think of something to say. He looked at me and asked, "Do you have a phone?"

"What?" Oh, real intelligent, Dahlia. Is this what you'll do every time he hugs you? "Oh . . . um . . . Yeah . . . I-I do. It's, um, in my bag," I mumbled.

He reached for where the rucksack sat on the examining table beside us (When did it get there?), and rummaged around inside for a second before victoriously displaying my flip phone. "You really should clean that thing. It's full of junk!" The Doctor scolded, taking out his sonic screwdriver. "I was gonna do this on Station One, but you were busy chattin' with The Face of Boe." He fiddled with the back of my phone, popping the battery off. "So, with a bit of jiggery-pokery," The Doctor smiled playfully.

I tried not to laugh, but I couldn't help it. Smiling, I asked, "Jiggery-pokery?"

"Yeah, The Doctor replied. "Came in first at jiggery-pokery. What about you?"

I shook my head, biting my lip, and giggling, "Nah, failed hullabaloo."

He finished with my phone, brandishing it smugly. He almost got to explain. Almost.

"Cool! So now I can make calls when and wherever I want! Just need to watch those roaming
charges," I beamed, "Thanks, Doctor."

He slumped and his face fell.

Oh, bugger me. He was trying to impress me again.

I looked at him sheepishly. "Sorry, I stole your thunder again, didn't I." Not a question—a statement.

Immediately, The Doctor straightened. A grin split his face as he said, "Guess I'll just have to try harder then." He winked.

Even if my cheeks were flushed and I was flustered, I couldn't let him win. "Yeah, you will."

The moment that followed would've been classified as romantic, with all the soul-searching eye contact, if either of us had that type of inclination, which we didn't.

Just when I was becoming uncomfortable with our intense staring contest, The Doctor piped up, "What do you want on your pizza?"

I blinked rapidly in surprise, "I was thinking, um, pepperoni and bacon. Hope you don't mind that," I answered, still partially thinking of the last few minutes.

"I'm fine with that. I'll go order." He slipped out the door.

"Wait!"

He popped his head back inside.

"The number is—"

"The one for Samuel's Pizzaria?" He finished with a smirk.

My eyebrows furrowed in confusion. How'd he . . ?

"I'm The Doctor, that's how." The Doctor grinned and left.

Huh. Who'd-a thought?

_He'll be gone for a few minutes, and my hands seem pretty dry._ I squirmed off my seat and carefully dug through the right pocket of my jeans. I tugged Koschei's pocket watch into the open and examined it for the thousandth time since it was given to me.

The watch was still a beautiful silver. Its intricate carvings never ceased to hypnotize me; and the ticking never faltered, always urging me forward.

I shouldn't be risking The Doctor discovering one of my many dirty, little secrets, but I couldn't help myself; this was my ritual. Whenever I needed reassurance or comfort, I would take out the watch. Such a worthless object shouldn't have so much power over my confidence, but it did. The watch represented Koschei's faith in me and my abilities. One glance at the watch and I'd face The Oncoming Storm. Even if doing so was a death sentence.

I ran my thumb over the glinting surface. A contented smile snuck onto my mouth; clicking the watch open, I stared at its face. The moving hands lulled me into a blissful, thoughtless trance.

Unfortunately, my peace didn't last long.
Heavy footsteps clanked down the hall, alerting me to The Doctor's presence. I hastily crammed the watch back in my pocket. Not a second too soon, either, because The Doctor came strutting into the med-bay right after I'd wiped the guilty look off my face.

The Doctor frowned. "What're you doing up?"

I quickly spouted off an acceptable excuse, "Just looking around. Some of this stuff looks familiar but most of it's, well, alien."

"Course it is! Superior Time Lord technology! Stuff like this won't be on Earth for another four hundred years," he boasted.

I rolled my eyes and sat back down on the table. "Hey, is your 'superior Time Lord technology' finished healing my hands yet?" I demanded.

The Doctor snorted. "Humans—you've got no patience, unlike—"

"Yeah, yeah, unlike the magnificent Time Lords," I mocked sarcastically. "But I asked about my hands, Doctor, not how Time Lords are superior to every other species in the known universe."

He pouted but huffed out a response, "They're fine now. Just peel off the leftover residue and throw it away."

*Leftover residue?* Looking down at my hands, I saw the deep purple film now covering my palms. *How did I not notice that?*

Slowly and carefully, I peeled the now thick, rubbery coating from both palms and tossed them in the garbage can at the foot of the bed. I inspected my newly repaired skin and was impressed.

The new skin was softer and pinker than the old, but that was to be expected. It also showed no sign of the earlier damage. There was no pain at all.

"That is so cool," I mumbled, slight awe showing in my voice.

"*Cool. All she says is cool!*" The Doctor grumbled to himself.

I would've teased him again but decided against it. I had questions of my own, and I doubted The Doctor would answer them if he was riled up.

"Can I ask you some questions now?" I requested casually but cautiously.

He grinned and leaned against a wall. Nodding and looking awfully amused, The Doctor encouraged me, "Go on, then."

"Tell me about your telepathy."

He didn't seem too surprised I knew about that little bit of Time Lord Biology. Maybe he was getting the hang of being around someone from another dimension.

"Depends on what you want to know." His grin fell into a smirk.

"Can you read my mind right now?" I was genuinely curious; this wasn't just some game to pass the time.

"I can read your mind, but only if I let my mental shields down. Plus, readin' a person's mind without their consent? That's beyond rude."
I propped my arms on my knees and then put my chin in my hands. "If I gave you consent, how far could you read?"

"Not that far, only surface thoughts. Anythin' deeper than that requires physical contact."

"Show me."

He faltered. His mouth gaped open in surprise while he fought for something to say.

I cannot express how satisfied I was to wipe that smug look off his face. The pride in my chest was almost scary.

"I-I'm not, um, sure if th-that's a good ide-idea," The Doctor stuttered.

"Why not?" I implored. "If it something you only do in dire situations or is it deeply personal . . ?

He swallowed thickly. "Yeah, somethin' like that." He gave me a curious look, asking, "Don't see why ya would want me pokin' 'round in ya mind anyway. Thought you humans liked privacy."

I snorted, rolled my eyes, and explained, "I already know to imagine a closed door in front of anything I don't want you to seem buuuut . . ." As I drew out the last word, I stretched my arms above my head with a groan of satisfaction. I settled my hands behind me and leaned back on them. "If it's some sort of taboo or crazy thing like that, I'm not gonna force or beg you," I finished.

The Doctor's face remained blank for a short period of time before breaking out in another grin. "Won't need to. I'll do it."

I tilted my head to the side. "Really?"

"Course. Always one to encourage learnin'—me," he said, making his way toward his original seat on the stool.

Elated, I beamed up at him. I couldn't resist saying, "Fantastic!"

The Doctor faced me when he sat and locked eyes with me. "Since you know what I'm about to do, let's get started."

I nodded and leaned forward eagerly, closing my eyes and envisioning the necessary doors locking in front of all my secrets.

My breath quickened when The Doctor placed his hands at my temples; my pulse pumped erratically as his breath fanned over my face. He was close, closer than I expected him to be. Much closer. Did he need to be that close? A memory of Ten and Madame de Pompadour popped up. He hadn't been this close to her . . .

"Ready?" The Doctor asked lowly.

Had his voice always been so husky?

Wetting my lips and banishing all thoughts of other Doctors, I said, "Ready as I'll ever be." I was proud to say my voice barely shook.

"Right," he seemed to nearly choke on the word. "Here goes."

And then it happened. *It* of course meant him entering my mind. I wasn’t really sure how to describe it except as . . . intimate. So very intimate. I could feel *him*, The Doctor, everywhere, from
my physical being to my soul. He glided through the corridors of my mind with ease, admiring and chuckling at what he sometimes found.

I gulped and panted heavily. Warmth was building deep in my gut and, behind another locked door, I begged myself not to orgasm just from this, at least not when he was still inside my mind.

Was he feeling the same thing? Did he always feel like I was feeling right now every time he shared minds with another being? Or was I just being a silly, little ape? And what did his mind look like? I couldn't see what he was seeing, but perhaps . . .

Yes, there it was; the door at the very edge of my mind that he had entered through. I slipped through it and paused on the other side. The Doctor didn't seem to notice I was wandering off and not staying put like a good little companion should. Though, I never did promise to follow his little rule.

Only a few steps forward and The Doctor's mind came to life around me, painting empty blackness with colors and dimensions.

I now stood in a sophisticated yet sparsely decorated room: the floor was polished oak; the walls were plastered with maroon wallpaper that was daintily painted with silver leaves; and then there were the doors. There were four on the wall to my left and in front of me, while one stood alone to my right. Each door was unusual and special in its own way. The first to my left gave off a stuck up, grouchy air and was completely black and white. The second in front of me was designed a bit off kilter; its edges and lines were slanted and it had so many colors and patterns I thought I'd go blind if I stared at it too long. But even though the doors were strange, the weirdest part wasn't the entryways; that title belonged to the feeling in my gut triggered by the colors and angles and odd airs.

These doors were familiar to me, but why was that? Wandering closer to the first door, I found out why.

On the first door, a shiny silver number appeared right at the top. One, I mouthed, hastily moving to the second door. Two. And then the third door—Three.

Every door was an entrance to a different Doctor's memories.

Guilt nagged at me. Should I be here? I mean, The Doctor probably didn't even believe I could enter his mind, let alone see all this. This was his mind, his personal haven. Did I have a right to befoul that?

"Well, only one way to find out," I muttered, shuffling toward Door 4. "Okay, so, if this door is locked, then it's safe to say all the others are locked, too. If it's locked, then I immediately leave and never tell The Doctor about this. Ever." With that promise, I reached for the silver handle.

Apparently, my hesitation wasn't needed, because the handle turned on its own, opening the door to my explorations.

As soon as I slipped through the door, I was greeted by the Fourth Doctor.

He smiled and held out a paper bag. "Jelly baby?"

What the fudge was going on? "Um . . ."

He waved off my bewilderment. "I understand you must be a bit confused. Not to worry, I'll answer any questions for have."
I nodded slowly, asking, "All right, first question—what're you doing here?"

Four frowned at me. 'I'm The Doctor. Why wouldn't I be here? This is my mind, after all."


He raised an eyebrow. "Then what do you mean?" he questioned, popping an orange jelly baby into his mouth.

Sighing, I attempted to clarify, "What I mean is that you're the fourth regeneration. The current Doctor is in his ninth. What're you doing here? Are you some sort of mental defense? If you are, then why aren't you in your ninth incarnation?"

"Ah," Four grinned, "That makes much more sense. This is what you humans classify as a Time Lord thing. Every time we regenerate, the previous form becomes a guardian over that particular incarnation's memories. Personally, I think it makes everything way too complicated, no matter how interesting."

I smiled and said, "I think I'll take that jelly baby now."

"What color?"

"Green."

His face twisted into a disgusted look, and he held out the bag for me. 'Here—I'm not touching that color unless it's on top of an orange."

I took the bag, pulled out three green for good measure, and handed the jelly babies back. "What's wrong with lime?" I asked.

"Oh nothing, nothing, except that it's the most revolting taste in the history of forever!" Four flailed his arms, spilling several colored jellies on the ground around us.

I let out a bark of laughter at his behavior, not bothering to try and cover my mouth if he thought it was rude. He was The Doctor; rude was his middle name.

"You think lime's the worst flavor? Orange is only second to grape or banana. None of those should ever be in candy," I retorted, shoving a jelly baby under my tongue.

"Take that back! Orange is the best flavor! It's a fact!"

Snickering, I shook my head playfully. "How's that a fact?"

"Because I said so, and I'm The Doctor, so whatever I say goes," Four barked out decidedly.

I suddenly burst out in laughter at the absurdity of it all. I was in The Doctor's mind, attempting to search through his memories, arguing with his fourth incarnation about which jelly baby flavor's the best.

"What? What's so funny?" Four demanded, frowning.

"Sorry, it's just," I paused to contain my giggles, "this whole situation it ridiculous is the best way."

His frown morphed into another grin, and he ate another jelly baby. "Oh, I knew I'd like you."

I paused and cocked my head. "Hm?"
"When you first entered my mind, your presence told me a few things about you, and I assumed I'd enjoy your company. I was correct."

A sudden caress interrupted my thought process. Oh. Right. The Doctor was still wandering through my mind. How could I forget? And what was he doing? What memories was he exploring? Was it something embarrassing? Knowing The Doctor, it probably was, and he'd use it against me at the first chance he got.

A new question bubbled up. "Can The Doctor hear us talking right now?" I asked Four.

He shrugged. "If he knew you were here, then yes, but he doesn't so he can't."

"Didn't he feel the way I felt when he entered my mind?"

"No," Four answered. "Humans aren't telepathic and therefore wouldn't register on a mental level."

"Would he feel that way if I made my presence known?"

"Yeah, or if you just interacted with his memories in a pleasant way."

I raised an eyebrow. "Like we're doing now?"

He chuckled and shook his head, leering at me. "Think more hands on."

Oh. Oh. A pink flush colored my cheeks. "Is-is that what he's doing in my mind?"

He burst out in heaving laughter, nearly doubling over with the force. "Maybe not to the extent that you're thinking of, my dear."

I sighed out a strange mixture of relief and disappointment. "All right, so, um, how?"

"Like this." Quick as lightning, Four grabbed my arm and jerked me down the hall.

Open doorways flashed by us. I was barely able to peek inside, but each small glance told me the rooms were to a different memory and in chronological order from when The Doctor first regenerated into Four and on.

Suddenly, Four skidded to a halt, nearly causing me to tumble into him.

"Here we are," He proclaimed proudly, shoving me toward the doorway. "In you go."

"Um, all right," I mumbled. I guess I'll trust you, you crazy, old man. If I trust future you, I can trust past you. You're the expert, not me.

I took a deep breath and tentatively peaked inside—or I would've if Four hadn't shoved me, saying, "Just get in there, stupid girl!"

I fell into a heap inside, but didn't stop there. Apparently, this memory started out on a slope, because soon I was rolling down a steep, grassy hill.

Oh, God! Oh, God! Oh, God! See Dahlia, this is what happens when you poke around in a Time Lord's mind! A past incarnation shoves you down a hill to your death! I thought rapidly, panicking at the possibilities that waited for me at the bottom of the hill, if there even was a bottom. Please don't let there be any rocks.

I came to a stop face down in a fluffy flower patch.
I rested there for a few minutes, merely breathing deeply and enjoying the silken petals of whatever flower I was currently laying on, but I knew I had to get up to investigate where I'd ended up. Finally, I rolled around enough so I was in a sitting position and gazed at my surroundings.

All the air left my lungs with a whoosh. I stared out into an endless field of flowers that, off in the distance, melded with a purple and orange sky. I swallowed and gasped out, "Holy hell that's beautiful."

"Of course, it is! This is the most beautiful recreational planet in the entire universe! And I would know," Four piped up from behind me.

I shrieked in surprise and fright, scrambling away from him. "Dammit, Doctor! Don't do that!" I spat, glaring at him.

He narrowed his eyes. "My memories, I do what I want," he said sternly. He started walking away from me. "Come on, you stupid ape, this isn't what I wanted to show you," he called back. Well, it was more of an order.

Standing, I marched after him, grumbling to myself, "Stupid, goddamn Time Lord, needs someone to teach him fuckin' manners. I'm gonna pop him upside the head as soon as . . ." I trailed off, but kept my scowl in place.

We walked for around ten minutes until something blue entered my vision. I perked up from my slumped position to get a better look and . . . Yes! It was! The TARDIS was only a few yards in front of us; though, she looked a bit more beaten up than she usually did. I raced past Four to get to the TARDIS first and caressed her chipping paint.

"Hello, love," I crooned affectionately, "it's so nice to see you, even if a few hundred years too early."

"She can't hear you, moron," Four scoffed, "You and I can't interact with animate creatures. Well, we could, but they can't see, hear, or sense our presence in any way."

I pouted slightly. I really did want to talk to the TARDIS again. She was such an interesting conversational partner. Patting the TARDIS' doors, I sighed, "I guess I'll talk to you some other time then, Sexy."

I had to rush to catch up to Four, who had decided to go ahead without me, and only did when he stopped.

"Doctor?" I pried.

His response was to shove a hand in my face and order, "Shut up and look down there."

With a pout, I did as he said.

Only a yard or two from us stood another Four and Sarah Jane. The Doctor was chatting on about something while Sarah listened, but I couldn't hear from where I was.

Looking at Four for permission, I bounded forward when it was granted with a simple nod.

I caught the end of The Doctor's sentence: "... Gardens of Reverent Monks."

"What planet are we on?" Sarah asked breathlessly, spinning in a circle to take in everything.
"Ravlon Res'verra, about seventy billion light-years from Earth in the year 3749," he answered, grinning smugly. He's obviously shown her this to impress her.

Sarah stopped her joyous twirling and turned to stare at The Doctor, carefully examining him. Frowning and with an interrogator's tone, she asked, "Why are we here? Is there some evil plot to use flowers as a means for world domination?"

He snorted and rolled his eyes. "Please, like that can ever happen, silly girl. No, we're here for relaxation. You know, sightseeing."

She scoffed, "One doesn't just go 'sightseeing' with The Doctor. There must be a plot afoot somewhere or else you wouldn't have landed the TARDIS here."

"No evil plots, no running for our lives, no villains trying to kill us today, Sarah," The Doctor said simply, adjusting his mile-long scarf. "Just you and I admiring an entire planet of flowers. Is that so hard to believe?"

Sarah kept eye contact with him, studying his face and eyes for any sign that he was lying. Suddenly, her serious expression was shattered by a huge grin and chiming laughter. Her joy was infectious, and soon The Doctor was beaming at her, as well, but neither broke eye contact.

I was right beside them now, barely a foot away, and observed every detail of their expressions, trying to translate the emotions in their gaze. I didn't need to try so hard; one look into The Doctor's eyes told me everything I needed to know. This was the day he told Sarah Jane he loved her but not in any conventional way and certainly not with words. So, he did it with flowers, an entire planet filled with alien flowers, and a day of leisure.

*Didn't know you were such a romantic on the inside, Doctor.* I chuckled lightly.

Four situated himself next to me, and we watched The Doctor and Sarah Jane frolic through the flowers (Sarah frolicked; The Doctor stoically followed, rattling off the ways one could die while frolicking).

I didn't attempt to hide the emotions that welled and bubbled over inside my ribcage. I wanted Four to see, but mostly, I wanted The Doctor, my Doctor, to feel them. I wanted him to feel everything I felt for him; the contentment at him finding someone he could love, even if he couldn't vocally tell her; the childish glee at listening to them bicker; the peace of seeing an entire planet covered in flowers; and the joy of just seeing him happy, for once. I let every emotion I experienced leak out of my mind and into The Doctor's.

Exhaling shakily, I opened my eyes (Funny, I couldn't remember closing them) and said unevenly, "Is . . . is that what you meant?" My energy had been drained from my body, leaving me exhausted but happy, and my knees wobbled treacherously.

Four steadied me by wrapping his arm around my waist and making me lean into him. "Yes," he responded slowly, "Exactly what I meant."

We stayed like that for several minutes more before leaving the memory.

As we approached the door I had originally entered through, I asked Four another question that had been bugging me. "Do you know what's happened after you've regenerated? Like, do you have Five's memories?" I don't know why I wanted to know—I just did.

"No. Memories bleeding through to past regenerations is a sign of insanity and should be treated with a mallet to the head," he answered blandly.
I frowned. "Why would it be bad? Each new incarnation of The Doctor keeps the old memories and gets new ones. Why would it make a difference which one had which recollections?"

He sighed deeply, like he was dealing with someone incredibly stupid and he couldn't understand why he was still in the same air space as them. "Because," he drawled, "too many memories in a body that shouldn't have them would cause an identity crisis. None of our minds would be able to process who we actually are, and we'd just burn up eventually."

"Oh," I blinked, "that does make sense."

His eyes rolled over to give me a bored stare. "Does it really?"

I nodded to enforce my moment of clarity. "Yeah, it's like if, say, while you were regenerating, some of your regenerative energy passed through me on accident. Part of you would merge with me and, if nothing was done about it, I'd burn alive in under an hour," I spouted rapidly. Just like with Donna.

Four didn't seem so convinced. "Sure."

I grinned sheepishly and suggested, "Exactly like that but really not at all?"

He beamed at me then, "Exactly." With a flourish, he presented the door. "Here we are. Now, a little bit of advice. If you actually want to get to know your Doctor better, you should try memories a bit closer to that regeneration," he ordered again instead of recommending like he was trying to.

"Okay, I'll try that next," I said, nodding and starting to slip out the door. "Oh, and Doctor?"

"Yes?"

"Thanks." I smiled and nearly closed the door that time.

Four genuinely smiled back that time and simply said, "You're welcome. Oh, and dear?"

Mentally, I rolled my eyes, but there was no real annoyance. I never going to be able to leave. I poked my head back inside Door Number Four.

"Hm?"

Four flashed me a mischievous smirk that was very nearly a grin. "Go for the ears," he purred, winking before pushing the door closed.

I glared at the door in frustration. Go for the ears? What the hell did that mean? Would I be battling someone whose weakness was their ears? And if so, how would he know? Goddammit, I came in here looking for answers and all I got were more questions!

Oh well, there's no point in thinking about it now. I'll dissect that thought later, when The Doctor isn't poking around my consciousness. And who's humming?

Someone was humming, but I was the only person in the room. It then hit me that The Doctor was humming out in the physical world. Could I respond to him? I hadn't tried since he connected our minds, so I tried now.

It was tough, getting my physical mouth to move when I'd gotten used to my psychic body, but I did it and asked The Doctor, "What tune is that? I've heard it before."

"That? The Girl from Ipanema."
"Ooooo, I love that song."

"Want to go hear it live one day?"

"I'd love to."

And then the moment was over, and I was back in front of Door Nine. I reached for the handle, expecting it to open on its own like Door Four, but it didn't. Pushing away my confusion, I gripped the brass door knob and twisted. The door didn't open. I couldn't even turn the knob all the way. It was locked.

I crossed my arms over my chest, now irritated, and glanced at Door Eight. Well, if I can't go through one . . . I wandered over to that past regeneration, stared at its handle, and licked my lips. I'll try the next best thing.

This door opened readily for me, swinging open with a creak. I stepped inside, prepared to meet the Eight Doctor, but he wasn't there.

I closed the door and leaned against it, observing the new hallway. Where was The Doctor? Shouldn't he be here?

I smacked my forehead. Moron. He doesn't just stand there and wait for people to walk through the door. Four might but not all The Doctors. He's probably observing a memory or something. Besides, it's basically designed the same way as the last one. I can find my way.

I didn't even have that far to travel. The Eighth Doctor's room was one long hallway that split off to certain sections of his memories. One went to the movie and others led to the books he'd starred in; I had no recollection of others.

The doorways to memories stopped with a dead end. To be exact, a steel door equipped with deadbolts and heavy locks; it was impossible for me to get through.

I wasn't even sure I wanted to get through. The only thing The Doctor would have under that much lock and key would be The Time War, and I didn't want to see that. I shouldn't see that. The Time War was when The Doctor was at his worst, even worse than in his darkest moments of The Oncoming Storm. That time in The Doctor's life wasn't something he wanted or needed me to see right now. Our friendship was too young, too raw to share that deep of a wound when it was still bleeding. I couldn't understand now, maybe not ever, and watching Gallifrey and its people burn wouldn't make a damn bit of difference.

And just like that, I turned on my heel and walked away. The Doctor was a private man, and I respected that. The Doctor hadn't gone knocking on any of my locked doors, as far as I could tell, so I wasn't about to go poking about where I shouldn't.

Maybe I could go talk with Six and finally ask him why in the seven rings of hell did he wear— I stopped mid-stroll when Eight came into view. No, I don't mean I turned a corner and there he was. The corridor was straight, no turns or corners to hide behind. I mean one second he wasn't there and the next he was. Creeped me the fuck out, though I kept my face as neutral as possible.

Giving him a nervous smile, I hesitantly greeted him, "H-hello, Doctor . . . wasn't sure you were here or . . ." I couldn't finish my sentence under the weight of his stare.

The Doctor said nothing.

I gulped.
Something was wrong. Eight looked like he'd been to Hell and had clawed his way back out. Every
time he shifted, I could see how limply he held himself, like he was barely keeping himself from
toppling over. But no matter how hard I tried not to, I kept coming back to his eyes; those dead,
glazed over eyes. I could see the promise of tears that he couldn't seem to bring himself to shed.
Despair rushed at me from every side, closing in on me, suffocating me. Terror and righteous fury
raged together through my veins, each battling for my attention over the grief, but only succeeded
in merging everything into a wave of emotions I couldn't comprehend. What was happening to me?
Why did I feel this way?

My eyes rattled in their sockets; panic causing them to move in every direction for the enemy.

Where are they? I know they're there! They only left to regroup, but they'll be back! They always
come back!

I ran my hands through my sweat slicked hair, only to find them sticky. Tremors shook my arms as
I pulled my hands back to see what coated them. I started hyperventilating when I saw what it was.

Blood. Dark red, sticky, warm blood. And it wasn't just my hands. My arms, body, face, legs, shoes
. . . There wasn't one spot where I wasn't drenched in blood. Bile rose in the back of my throat as I
gagged on the scent of smoke and bitter copper assaulting my nose.

Smoke. Fire. I could feel the fire attempting to grab at me and singe my flesh from my bones and
suffer the smoke as it stung my eyes. A bomb whizzed overhead, landing somewhere not too far
off and killing more of my kin. My pulse pounded in my ears; my heart was desperately trying to
keep up with my rising desperation.

Heart . . . what happened to my other one? Why isn't it beating?! Did a Dalek shoot me? Am I
dying? Regenerate! I need to regenerate! Why can't I regenerate?! Is it too late? No! It can't be!
I'm still breathing, still functioning perfectly. Why am I not in pain?

The hyperventilating was getting worse. My one functioning heart was going to explode if I kept
this up.

A small voice, deep inside my mind, whispered, This isn't real.

What? No. No! It's real! I'm in The Time War, fighting at Gallifrey and watching the other Time
Lords die as the Daleks slaughter us! This is real!

I knew that voice. Where did I know that voice from? It was a man, a very irritated man, but who
was he?

Stupid! The voice hissed. You know this isn't real and you know it! How can you function
perfectly fine with only one heart? Answer that!

I-I don't know!

It barked back, Yes, you do! The Eighth Doctor is projecting his recollection of The Time War
onto you!

The Eighth Doctor, but . . . That's me. I'm The Doctor. My name's . . . The . . . Doctor? No . . . No,
that isn't right. What's my name? D . . . D, it starts with a D, I know it does! D, D, D-A? Yes, that's
comes after that? What? What?
DAHLIA! Koschei shouted.

Yes, yes, Koschei. Koschei is trying to help. He’s trying to get me out of the war. The Doctor put me here. I need to get out. I need to get out.

"Doctor!" I whimpered while staring at my blood covered hands. Not good enough. "Doctor!" I screamed this time.

The war around me stuttered. I'd grabbed his attention, but he wasn't letting up.

"Doctor, please!" I shrieked, "Please! Please, you have to stop this! I don't want to see this! Doctor!" Tears streamed down my cheeks, creating streaks in the drying blood. "Doctor, please! Please, stop!" I couldn't speak anymore. My sobs kept choking off my pleas. My knees gave out, and I crashed to the ground, screwing my eyes shut and blocking my ears to ease my suffering.

I gave one final beg for mercy: "Doctor, please, this-this isn't who you are . . ."

Curl up in a ball, I silently begged for the torture to stop.

You can open your eyes now, child, Koschei murmured soothingly in my ear.

Slowly, I uncurled myself and opened one eye a sliver. I was back in the hallway behind Door Eight. Opening my eyes fully, I scanned the room for The Doctor. He hadn't moved.

I frantically scrambled to my feet. I needed to get away. Eight was unstable. At any moment, he could fling me back into The Time War, and I-I couldn't take that. So, I ran. I ran, but I barely got a few feet. Eight had managed to get a good grip on my wrist, keeping me from fleeing like my instincts told me to do.

"D-Doctor, I stuttered frantically. "I need t-to leave now. Please, D-Doctor, l-let me go." I felt pathetic and guilty. The Doctor was my friend, yet I was so frightened of him. I doubted anyone would blame me for it.

He shook his head and raggedly groaned, "Need to see."

I gulped. "N-need to see what?"

He pointed behind him, at the end of the hall where the deadlocked door stood.

My breath became shallow and quickened. No. No-no-no-no. No! I can't see that again. I can still smell the blood . . .

I was so caught up in my panicking I hadn't notice Eighth drop my wrist until it thumped against my hip. I attempted to focus my sight on him and not bleed back into The Doctor's memory.

"Need to see," The Doctor said despondently and held out his hand.

I stared at the offering. Seriously? He expected me to trust him after the torment he put me through? Did he really think I would follow him into Hell willingly?

The Doctor didn't retract his hand.

Me tense muscles uncoiled, leaving me to collapse in on myself. The, n he really can see inside my head. It was a miserable thought, but a true one.

The Doctor needed someone to rely on. Someone who could pull him out of his darkness.
Someone who would follow him into Hell on Earth without so much as a second thought.

I mean, all his other companions have done it, why couldn’t I?

**Because none of them were told they needed to witness The Time War.** Oh great, Koschei was back, and he had an opinion.

So, could I do it? Could I follow a Doctor who wasn't mine into an inferno I would no doubt have nightmares about for months? Could I take on The Doctor's burdens and scars as my own? Or would I turn away and run like a coward?

I stared hard at Eight's unwavering hand and took a deep breath.

I placed my hand in his.

The Doctor curled his warm fingers around my frozen ones. He led me to the steel door. Lifting his free hand, he tapped the metal twice, once, and then twice again.

I started shaking as the bolts screeched open, but then realized the sound was coming from me. I clenched The Doctor's hand tighter.

He moved to open the door.

"Wait," I choked out.

He stopped, and he waited.

"Doctor." I was starting to cry again and my voice trembled, "Doctor, please, please don't let go of my hand."

Eight didn't say anything—didn't move—for the longest time, and then he nodded and laced his fingers with mine, tightening his grip on my smaller hand until it was painful.

I sobbed. "O-okay."

The Doctor gently pushed the door open.

We were greeted by flames and smoke and screams and cries of "Exterminate!" and the wretched smell of burning flesh filled the air, but I didn't turn away. I didn't close my eyes. I didn't beg The Doctor to close the door and block it all out.

I cried. I cried and watched as Gallifrey burned.

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In the original room, I sat Lotus style on the floor. I wasn't thinking about what I'd just seen. I wasn't thinking of anything other than how dead I felt inside.

I didn't know how long I sat there, but after a while, The Doctor started pulling out of my mind and severing the mental connection. The wallpaper peeled away first; then the flooring seemed to be swallowed by ink; the doors were the only objects left in the nothingness until each of them started to fade, as well. They went in order, from One to Nine. In no time at all The Doctor's mindscape was gone, and I was surrounded by darkness. Then that fell away, too.

I felt like I was falling and shut my eyes, focusing on not getting sick, and kept them shut, even
after I'd settled back into my physical body.

"Dahlia?" The Doctor asked. His concern was obvious though I couldn't see his face.

"Ugh, you should've warned me about the possible motion sickness, Doc," I groaned, screwing my eyes shut even tighter. I had to get myself under control and act normally. The Doctor didn't know I had been inside his head or what I'd seen. I couldn't tell him. He was guilty enough. I wasn't going to add to that.

I could practically feel his sheepish grin. "Ah. Sorry 'bout that."

Opening my eyes, I wrinkled my nose and smiled. "It's fine—" I would've said more, but he was right there. The Doctor was maybe five inches from my face, all sparkling blue eyes and face splitting grin. My breath hitched, and I stopped breathing.

If possible, his grin got wider as he asked, "You all right?"

I couldn't speak, so I nodded instead.

He moved closer. "Ya sure?"

*Oh god, Doctor, please stop torturing me like this. I can't handle this after what I just saw. I could literally burst into tears right now.* My face was burning, and my stomach was twisted into knots of anticipation. The skin where his hands still cupped my face tingled, and *Oh shit!*

Was he still reading my mind?! Please tell me he wasn't! Oh god, the humiliation if he was—I wouldn't be able to look him in the eye ever again.

I tested it. *Doctor? Doctor, are you still reading my mind?* Nothing. Just my own thoughts. Good, now I can panic in peace, which is great because he keeps getting closer!

"Dahlia," The Doctor hummed, grabbing my attention.

My eyes focused on him again. "Y-yeah?" *Fuck, stop stuttering! He'll know something's up!*

He chuckled. "Pay attention." And then he kissed me.

_The Doctor_ was kissing me. The Doctor was _kissing_ me. The Doctor was _kissing me_. The mother fucking Doctor was fucking kissing me!

No matter how many times or ways I thought that, it didn't compute with my overworked brain. I felt his dry, slightly chapped lips gently mold and press against mine. I felt him tilt my jaw to get better access. I felt air fan over my cheeks when he exhaled through his nose. I felt his teeth lightly scrape my bottom lip. I knew it was happening, but I didn't believe it. And by the time I got up the courage to kiss back, The Doctor was pulling away.

We observed each other: I was obviously worked up with half lidded eyes, flushed cheeks, smeared lip gloss, and rapid breathing, while he didn't seem bothered at all. His grin was in place and nothing was different other than his darkened eyes that seemed to bore through me.

How could he be so calm when he'd just given me the most mind-blowing kiss I'd ever had in my entire life?

_O-okay, think, Dahlia, think. Why'd he kiss you? There has definitely got to be a reason. The Doctor would not kiss me without a very good reason._ Nothing came to mind; though, I wasn't
exactly in the best condition to be working out the complex inner workings of a Time Lord's reasoning. You know, with all the emotions Eight hammered into me, and I was still floundering from that kiss.

I want to ask The Doctor why he just kissed me but all that came out was "Uuuhh . . . wha . . ?"

He beamed like a child on Christmas. "Just cashin' in me bribe."

Bribe? He lost me there.

The Doctor must've noticed my confusion because he continued, "Back on Station One you bribed me with a kiss if I moved faster. Just collectin'. Didn't mean to startle ya."

Oh. Now I remember. Yeah. Okay. That was good, really. I didn't understand why I'd gotten my hopes up; it's not like The Doctor would actually fall for me. I mean, how Mary Sue would that be? A girl is kidnapped by The Master and taken to the world of Doctor Who to fill the void where Rose was supposed to be, and The Doctor falls for her just like he did with Rose. Something like that would only happen to a Mary Sue, and I was not a Mary Sue. Fuck, now I'm paranoid I'm gonna turn into a Mary Sue.

But despite all that, I couldn't stop the disappointment I felt.

"Oh, yeah, sorry, I forgot for a moment," I mumbled. God, I was so embarrassed.

The Doctor almost responded. A knock interrupted him, and I was glad for it. The air around us was getting tense and awkward. I needed a bit of alone time to clear my head.

"That'll be the pizza. Be right back," he said, standing.

"Hold on, I've got money in here . . ." I sighed, reaching for my bag.

He scoffed, "Do ya really think I haven't got a few quid around here?"

I gave him an annoyed look. "You're The Doctor. You've never had to worry about money."

Pouting, he retorted, "Doesn't mean I don't have any. Now, sit there. I'll be right back."

As soon as he left, I unwound and lounged back on the table, closing my eyes. God, I was exhausted. Everything hurt, but my legs were the worst. My stomach continued to clench with hunger, but I'd feed it in a moment, so I ignored it. Though, right now I didn't care about eating. All I wanted to do was sleep. Once the Doctor showed me where my room was, I was just going to flop down on the bed and sleep; never mind a shower, even if I desperately needed one with all the dried sweat I was covered in. I lifted my shirt collar to my nose and sniffed. I reeled back. Ugh! That was rank! How had The Doctor managed to stay so close to me?

I licked my lips out of habit, expecting to taste the watermelon of my lip gloss, but all I got was a cinnamon and honey taste that could have only come from The Doctor. It was a nice taste.

After that I kind of dozed off, fluctuating between sleep and waking until The Doctor returned and woke me.

We ate in relative silence until The Doctor asked, "What I don't understand is how you have a bag that's dimensionally transcendental."

I just smiled tiredly at him and took a slice of pizza.
At my plea for a shower and rest, The Doctor agreed to hold off on adventures until I was at peak performance and once again led me through the TARDIS' many corridors. We halted in front of a large black door with shimmery teal flowers painted on it.

Giving The Doctor another smile and an exhausted "Thank you", I opened the door and headed inside.

It was dark in the room, but I didn't bother to turn on the light and inspect the room. I'd do that later.

I shuffled along, searching for the bed, and yawned. I couldn't remember the last time I was this tired.

Finally, my legs hit a soft, cushiony surface that could only be a bed. I briefly thought the TARDIS had just moved it for my convenience and noted to thank her later.

Shrugging off my bag, I climbed into the bed and cocooned myself in the blankets, falling asleep faster than I ever had before.
I stormed into the wardrobe of the TARDIS, ignoring The Doctor's pleas for me to stop and talk about what had just happened.

There was nothing to talk about. I had failed, that was that.

Furious, I roughly ripped at the buttons of the dress I was wearing. As I tugged and pulled, I heard several tell-tale pops of stitches snapping. If I wasn't so angry, I might've given a damn since I did like the dress and The Doctor did, too, but right now I didn't care. Finally, the fabric artwork of silk, cloth, and embroidery slid off my body and to the floor. I kicked it away uncaringly and searched for regular clothes.

"Stupid, stupid, stupid, moron!" I screeched in my mind. Why did I think I could make a difference on this adventure? I should've known better! Why did Gwyneth have to be so stubborn? I didn't want her to die! And why didn't The Doctor listen to me? If people would just listen to me for once in their damn lives!

The day had started out so promisingly, too.

The TARDIS tumbled to and fro with The Doctor's maniacal driving. The Doctor and I clutched at the console, trying our hardest not to be tossed around like ragdolls and barely succeeding. I was holding down a button on The Doctor's orders while he frantically tried to calm the ship's flight by flipping every switch and smashing every button.

"Hold that one down!" he ordered, pointing to a random lever.

"Wrong answer! The reason you don't read it is because you threw it into a supernova!" I barked. "I still don't understand why you did that."

"I disagreed with it!"

"How could you disagree with it? It's a friggin' manual!"

"Oi! No complainin'! I promised you a time machine, and that's what you're gettin'!" he reached around the console to press a rainbow of multiple buttons. "You've seen the future, now let's have a look at the past." The Doctor glanced up at a screen and wildly said, "1860! How does 1860 sound?"

"What's so special about 1860?"

He grinned. "Don't know. Let's find out! Hold on—here we go!"

A sudden, rough turn sent both of us toppling to the floor. The Doctor grinned widely while I stuck my tongue out at him. We stood up and brushed our clothes off.

"That was a rough landing," I noted.
"You all right?" The Doctor asked.

I nodded, rolling my neck. "Yeah, a bit bruised, but nothing serious. Did we make it?"

Grabbing the screen to look at it, he exclaimed, "I did it! Give the man a medal! Earth, Naples, December 24th, 1860."

_Naples, sure_, I thought smugly.

"Christmas—it's Christmas," I said slowly, part of me not believing it.

The Doctor gestured grandly at the doors. "All yours."

I shook my head and smiled. "No, but I mean. It's Christmas Eve 1860 only once. Then it's just gone on the 25th. No one can ever go back and relive it. Except for you. You can go wherever and whenever you want with just a flick of a switch."

He smirked and leaned against the console. "Not a bad life."

I smirked back. "Better with two." Then I spun on my heel, trudging towards the stairs that led to the deeper parts of the TARDIS.

"Where do ya think you're goin'?" The Doctor gaped.

I looked back over my shoulder. "Dude," I said, "that's 1860. If I go out there looking like this, they'll probably accuse me of being a witch or something, and that is drama I do not need. So, I'm gonna go change into something more appropriate."

"Fair point. There's a wardrobe down there, first left, second right, third on the left, go straight—" He cut himself off when he saw I was retreating up the steps, ignoring him. "Oi! You listenin' to me?"

"No, I'm not. Really, Doctor, you should stop babbling to yourself. Someone might call you crazy," I called back, and then added, "And change your outfit! Not just your jumper! For once you can wear clothing from the correct period!"

I didn't need to go through all those twists and turns The Doctor had been trying to direct me with. The TARDIS moved a room I had trouble finding if I asked nicely enough, and she did so with the wardrobe.

The TARDIS, in all her glory, had a wardrobe that seemed to go on forever. Miles and miles of clothes from every planet and time period packed floor upon floor of clothing racks. Fortunately, I wouldn't have to go gallivanting around searching for 19th century Earth. A rack of dresses appropriate for 1860 slid out from one side of the room for my inspection.

Too pink, too pastel, too flowery, too leafy, too . . . ugh. I made a face and hastily tossed a puke green monstrosity held together by feathers and lace aside. Ew, it smelt like moldy cheese. _Oh, that's not too bad, but it's yellow and I look awful yellow. Wait . . . this one. This one is perfect._

The one I picked out seemed to be made of silk or something close to it and had lots of ruffles. And not those huge ruffles that made you look like you'd just gone through a paper shredder. No, these were tightly wound, classy even. The fact that the dress was a deep purple, my favorite color, sealed the deal, though.

Once I managed to get into it, I loved it even more. The neckline, the color, the slim fit—
everything flattered what I wanted it to flatter. I decided against bundling it all up on the back; I liked the train better. Without even contemplating heels, I slipped on a pair of plain black converse and made for the door.

The TARDIS would have none of that, it seemed, because a machine rose out of the floor, blocking my path. Personally, I didn't want to get anywhere near it. The thing looked like a Frankenstein-ed version of a beauty parlor hair dryer, plushy seat and everything.

"Um, you want me to get in that," I said dryly, pointing at the contraption.

The TARDIS hummed in response.

Nervously glancing around the room, I gave in, "Fine, I'll trust you on this, but if it fries my brain, you're gonna be the one to tell The Doctor."

She buzzed back happily.

Hesitantly, I took my hair down from its ponytail and slowly lowered myself into the chair and waited. The part that would normally be the dryer lowered, fully encasing my head; it whirred to life and started whatever process the TARDIS programmed it for. What did I do? I sat there and let the TARDIS do anything she liked.

The machine puffed out a huge jet of steam as it finished, retreating back into the floor as soon as I got up. My hair was warm from the process, and I moved over to the full length mirror and was shocked at what I saw.

The machine had somehow managed to turn my ragtag corkscrew curls into tight, fluffy, dramatic curls; some were piled on and around head, held in place by a string of white beads, while the rest fell airily against my neck and shoulders.

Wow. I came back to down to Earth when I realized how long I'd spent getting dressed. **God, The Doctor's probably annoyed right now, and I'm going to have to listen to him moan about women and their poor time management.**

Quickly snatching a set of pearl earrings and necklace, I rushed down the halls, trying to clip the jewelry in place and not ruin my hair in the process. I stopped right outside the console room and smoothed everything back into its rightful place and took a deep breath. Really, I didn't see why I was nervous. I knew what he was going to say. Of course, hearing it on TV and it being directed at you are two very different things.

My footsteps gave me away. I knew because The Doctor started talking to me before he even saw me. "About bloody time! What took ya so long? Didn't think ya were the type to—" He finally caught sight of me and faltered, "**Blimey...**"

"Think it looks all right? I decided to go with the long sleeves since, you know, it's winter and all," I rambled, more to myself than to him. I spun slowly, holding the dress up a bit more than normal to compensate for the train.

I caught The Doctor's eye and watched him gulp. Then he noticed my stare and coughed awkwardly, turning his attention back to the console.

"You look beautiful... Considerin'," he said, fiddling several multicolor wires.

Mentally sighing and rolling my eyes, I cocked out a hip and placed a hand on said hip. "Considering what?" I huffed. **Here it comes...**
"That you're human."

I smiled wryly and brushed it off. "I'll take that as a compliment. Now, didn't I tell you to change?"

The Doctor smirked and fingered his shirt. "I changed my jumper."

I scoffed, "That doesn't count."

He shrugged off my annoyance, gripped my wrist, and tugged me toward the door.

Shrugging out of his hold, I shifted in front of him. "Nuh-uh, my turn. You've had plenty of time to relish the moment. I go first."

I pulled the TARDIS doors open and stepped outside. I was immediately thankful I'd worn a long sleeved dress; the cold wind chilled me even through the sleeves and layers. Eyes stinging slightly from the wind, I stared out at the whiteness around me. There was so much snow.

"You look impressed," The Doctor piped up smugly.

I shushed him and walked out into 1860. Snow crunched underfoot, leaving perfect imprints of my converse. I stopped a few feet away from the TARDIS and inhaled deeply. The cool air stung my lungs and airways, clearing my head.

The Doctor sauntered over to me. He held out his arm. "Shall we?"

Smiling, I linked my arm in his and said, "Time to see history."

We strolled along the pathways, taking in the sights. Okay, I took in the sights, whirling my head every which way to examine the people, buildings, carriages, and shops. The Doctor stopped to pay for a newspaper, eager to check the location and time period. I waited a few feet away, watching a group of giggling children chase each other through the crowds.

The Doctor was at my side again, flipping through the newspaper. His enthusiastic expression deflated almost immediately. "I got the flight a bit wrong."

"I know," I hummed, only half listening.

"It's not 1860—it's 1869."

"Don't care."

"And it's not Naples."

"Don't care."

"It's Cardiff."

Sighing irritably, I crossed my arms, muttering, "It doesn't matter! All I care about is that it's Christmas time in the 19th Century!"

This seemed to lift his spirits a bit, but a scream from the theatre across the street put a grin on his face. "Now that's more like it!" he said, grabbing my hand and dashing inside the theatre.

You guys know what happened after that: We ran into Charles Dickens and saw the possessed dead woman. I was the only one to see the Mr. Sneed and Gwyneth snatch the old woman up and run away.
I had a brief inner battle over whether I should let myself get kidnapped, deciding this was one of the times it was necessary for me to play that role—even if I hated playing damsel in distress. Besides, if I didn't, how would The Doctor know where to go? So, I got knocked unconscious, stuffed into the back of a carriage with a coffin, and kidnapped. Not my proudest moment.

I woke up with a pounding in my head. Groaning, I sat up and massaged my temples in an attempt to get rid of the pain. Then, I remembered where I was and hastily scooted off the table and to the door. Even though I knew it was locked, I tried the door anyway.

Shit, I thought. Okay, okay, think—maybe you can reason with them, tell them The Doctor won't help if they hurt his companion. Not the best option but worth a shot.

I turned around. The grandson was sitting upright in his coffin. Here goes nothing.

"I know who you are! You're the Gelth!"

No reaction. The grandson climbed out of his box, followed by the grandmother.

I tossed a vase at them. Nothing. "The Doctor won't like it if you kill his companion! He won't help you! He'll go all Oncoming Storm on you, and you won't like that!" I babbled, bracing myself on the door and kicking the grandson in the chest. He crumpled to the floor, causing the grandmother to trip. Fuck bargaining. "Dammit, Doctor, where are you?" I screamed, pounding at the door. "Are you waiting for another bribe? 'Cuz if you are, you've got it!" The grandson gripped my waist and tugged me away from the door. I attempted to get away, but it did no good. "Hell, I'll even add in a strip tease if that gets you to move any faster. Goddammit, Doctor!"

The door burst open, revealing The Doctor, Charles Dickens, Gwyneth, and Mr. Sneed. For a second, they all just stood there, gaping like a bunch of morons.

"Calling Brainless! Please attempt rescue at any moment!" I shouted, thrashing in my captor's hold.

That seemed to bring The Doctor back from Space Mountain. He gripped my arm and jerked me out of the room and into the hall.

"I think I'll settle for a kiss," he briefly mumbled in my ear.

Before I could retort, Dickens wheezed out, "It's a prank. Must be. We're under some mesmeric influence."

I gave him a look of Are You Really That Stupid. "Really? That's what you're gonna go with?" I rolled my eyes. "Can a girl get a bit of creativity up in here?"

Dickens' eyebrows rose nearly to his hairline. "Hello."

"Hi," I replied quietly, and then looked back at The Doctor. "I leave you alone for a few minutes, and you pick up Charles Dickens."

He ignored me, focusing intently on the Gelth. "My name's The Doctor. Who are you, then? What do you want?"

The grandson opened his mouth, allowing a bone chilling wail to escape. "Failing! Open the Rift. We are dying. Trapped in this form. Cannot sustain. Help us . . ."A nearly dual-toned voice said.
Both corpses tilted their heads back, and vapor spilled out and disappeared. The bodies collapsed.

I glared at Mr. Sneed, barking, "First, you take a woman in plain sight, and no, it doesn't matter that she was dead. Second, you friggin' kidnapped me! Oh, and let's not forget that you copped a feel. Yeah, I felt that, you bastard!" I shuddered. "Eugh!"

The Doctor stood close to me and glared at Mr. Sneed with enough ferocity to set the man on fire.

Mr. Sneed sneered. "I won't be spoken to like this!"

"Sit your ass back down!" I ordered. "I'm not done yet. And then you put me in a room with the dead people who were coming back to life! So start talking."

"It's not my fault," Sneed sputtered. "It's this house! Always had a reputation. Haunted. But I never had much bother, till about three months back. Then the stiffs—" He fumbled when we all glared at him. "Er, the dearly departed started getting restless."

Dickens snorted, crossing his arms, and spat, "Tommyrot!"

"But you witnessed it! Can't keep the beggars down, sir, they walk," Mr. Sneed said frantically. "And it's the queerest thing. They hang onto scraps of their old selves. One old fella—used to be a sexton—almost walked into his own memorial service. Like the old lady going to your performance, just as she'd planned."

Gwyneth returned with a tray of cups. She set one in front of The Doctor, saying, "Two sugars, sir, just how you like it."

The Doctor's eyes followed her as she made her way to me next.

"Know ya don't like tea, miss, so I got ya some coffee with lots of milk and sugar," she said, smiling, and moved over to Dickens.

Even though I knew why she knew I didn't like tea, it was still weird for someone to know something about me that I hadn't told them; though, I did take a deep gulp of the coffee. Ah, sweet caffeine, what would I do without you?

Dickens scoffed, "Morbid fancy."

The Doctor frowned and tried to convince the man. "Charles, you were there."

"I saw nothing but an illusion," Dickens dismissed.

The Doctor glared and spat, "If you're gonna deny it, don't waste my time, just shut up."

Dickens was taken aback. Apparently, he hadn't been spoken to like that in a very long time, if ever.

"What about the gas?" The Doctor asked Mr. Sneed.

"That's new, sir. Never seen anything like that."

"Means it's getting stronger," The Doctor muttered, "The Rift's gettin' wider, and somethin's sneakin' through."
"You should probably explain what the Rift is, Doctor," I cut in, "since only two of us know what you're taking about."

"A weak point in time and space. A connection between this place and another. That's the cause of ghost stories, most of the time," he clarified curtly.

"That's how I got the house so cheap!" Sneed exclaimed. "Stories go back generations. Echoes in the dark. Queer songs in the air. And this feeling, like a shadow passing over your soul. Truth be told, it's been good for business, just what people expect from a gloomy trade like mine."

I rolled my eyes at the man's foolish thoughts. Who would really buy a house if it gave you an off feeling? Crazy people, that's who.

Quickly becoming bored, I followed Gwyneth into the kitchen with the intent to assist her with the dishes.

"Please, miss, you shouldn't be helping. It's not right," the maid objected, attempting to take the cups I held away from me.

"Don't be silly. You've probably done your fair share of work for Sneed. How much does he pay you?"

"Eight pounds a year, miss."

_Don't act weird, don't act weird._ "Oh really?" I said in my best fake surprised voice.

"I know! I'd've been happy with six!" Gwyneth beamed at me.

"You went to school, didn't you?" I asked hesitantly.

"Course I did, what d'you think I am, an urchin? I went every Sunday, nice and proper."

"Once a week?" _Man, I wish I only had to go to school once a week._

"We had to do sums and everything." Gwyneth giggled and bit her bottom lip. "To be honest, I hated every second."

"God, who doesn't?" I groaned, leaning against a wall.

Gwyneth leaned in closer and motioned for me to do the same. "Don't tell anyone, but one week, I ran away down the Heath, all on my own."

I pouted and grumbled, "Wish I could've done that. We had these teachers who would tell our parents if we weren't at school that day. A lot of kids got in trouble, and I didn't want any part of that." A smirk curled onto my mouth. "But a friend of mine did, Jasmine. She always pestered me to cut with her and go off to look at boys."

Gwyneth immediately retreated into her shell, glancing away in embarrassment. "Well, I don't know much about that, miss."

My smirk turned into a wicked grin as I pressed, "You sure? Nobody at all?"

She gave me a shy look before quietly admitting, "I suppose . . . There is one lad. The butcher's boy. He comes every Tuesday afternoon. Such a nice smile on him." A happy sigh left her.

"I've always preferred a guy's eyes to his smile," I added, a pair of expressive blue eyes floating to
the front of my mind.

Gwyneth giggled and gave me a knowing smile. "I bet you do, miss, 'specially with the handsome bloke you're with."

Who . . ? Oh, she must've been referring to . . . "Are you referring to The Doctor?" I had to make sure.

She frowned at me. "O' course! Who else?"

I shook my head. "No, no, no, you've got it all wrong. The Doctor and I are just friends. He doesn't like me like that," I hurriedly denied.

The maid's frown deepened, and she stopped her work completely to fully face me. "Why d'ya say that?" she questioned.

Sighing, I raked a hand down my face and started my explanation, "He likes blondes—and they can't just be blonde. The girl has to be perky and happy and flirty and amazed by everything he does. They have to let him be a knight in shining armor." I growled out the last bit, "I'm none of those, and I never will be."

"Sounds like more than just that, miss," Gwyneth prodded softly.

I barely resisted the urge to comb my hands through my hair wildly. I started pacing. "It's just—I've got this friend, and he told me that we're supposed to be together! And I know it's not gonna happen!"

"How do ya know that?"

"Because," I inhaled deeply, urging myself to confess to this one person, "I've been in this situation before. Someone tells me a guy likes me, I confess that I like him, and he reveals that it's all a big joke. I know The Doctor wouldn't do that, but being rejected by him would be almost as bad. It would probably ruin our friendship. I can't take that chance . . ."

Gwyneth put her arm around my shoulder and gave me a half hug. "Feels better to let it out, yeah?"

Chuckling sadly, I nodded, wrapping my arms around myself as she moved away. "I guess . . ."

"Glad I could help, miss," she said. "'Specially since you can't talk to your sister 'bout these things anymore."

"Yeah," I muttered and then paused. "Wait, how do you know about my sister?"

Gwyneth started to panic. "Don't know, must've been The Doctor."

"No, couldn't have been. I didn't tell him much about my family," I contradicted.

"From back in your world," Gwyneth said suddenly.

I froze. Of course she knew about that. How could she not? She knew Rose was from the future in the TV series; why wouldn't she know I was from another dimension? Still, no matter how much it made sense, I still couldn't shake the feeling of how creepy it was.

"How do you know that?" I asked, trying not to frighten her, but I couldn't help it.

"Mr. Sneed says I think too much. I'm all alone down here," she said, motioning around the
kitchen. "Bet you've got a dozen servants, haven't you?"

"I won't let you change the subject. Just answer the question."

Gwyneth stepped forward, saying, "And you've come such a long way."

I quickly retreated a few steps. "Uh . . . What makes you say that?"

"I just do. You're from . . . America. I've seen America in drawings, but never like that, all those people rushing about . . . half-naked, for shame. So much noise! Those metal boxes racing past . . . and those birds in the sky, also metal with people inside! You've flown so far. Further than anyone. The things you've seen. In person and in moving pictures. The darkness. The big bad wolf . . . a burning world . . . all those children . . . the drums—" Gwyneth stumbled backwards, away from me with obvious fear in her eyes and on her face. "Oh, I'm sorry, miss. I'm sorry."

"It's fine, don't worry." Even as I hurried to comfort the poor girl, I couldn't help but think of all the things she'd described. That wasn't supposed to happen! She was only supposed to talk about the wolf! Not . . . all those things . . . . I didn't know what to think. I needed time to mull this new information over. I could already tell what most of the warnings were: Bad Wolf, Gallifrey, and the drums from Koschei's mind, but I had no clue what Gwyneth meant by children.

"Can't help it. Ever since I was a little girl, Mam said I'd got the sight. She told me to hide it."

"But it's gettin' stronger. More powerful. Is that right?" The Doctor said from the doorway. I could feel the presence of The Oncoming Storm pulsing off him without even acknowledging him.

"Doctor, we can't do that!" I whispered urgently to him. This was my chance to save Gwyneth! All I had to do was convince The Doctor—

"Why not? Because it's not decent? Not polite? It could save their lives," he growled at me.

"Open the Rift. Let the gelth through. We're dying. Help us . . . Pity the gelth!" A wail pierced the room, and soon after the gelth faded from view.

I caught Gwyneth as she slumped over.

Dickens broke the silence that had fallen. "All true. It's all true."

I scoffed mentally, No shit, Sherlock.

Laying Gwyneth down in the chaise, I gave her a once over. She was too pale, but at least she was breathing. Her eyes fluttered open.

"You're okay, all you need to do now is rest," I murmured softly, stroking her hair.

"But my angels, miss! They came, didn't they? They need me—" Gwyneth gasped, lurching up from her laying position.

I tried to push her down as gently as possible.

"They do need you, Gwyneth. You're their only chance of survival—" The Doctor fired off quickly before I could stop him.
"No! You're not using her for any plot! She's just a girl, Doctor," I said, blocking his path to the maid.

Sneed piped up. "But what did you say, Doctor? Explain it again, what are they?"

"Aliens," The Doctor answered, glaring at me.

"Like foreigners, you mean?"

"Pretty foreign, yeah. From up there," The Doctor said, pointing up at the ceiling.

"Breac'n?"

"Close, and they've been trying to get through from . . . Breac'n to Cardiff," The Doctor didn't attempt a more in-depth explanation. "But the road is blocked. Only one or two can slip through. Even then, they're weak. They can only test-drive the bodies for so long. They have to revert to gas and hide in the pipes."

Dickens said, "And that's why they need the girl?"

"Well, they can just forget about it," I sneered.

The Doctor turned his attention back to me. "But she can help. Living on the Rift has made her part of it. Gwyneth can open up the Rift, make a bridge, and let them through."

"Doesn't mean she should do it."

"Incredible," Dickens interrupted. "Ghosts that are not ghosts but beings from another world—only able to exist in our realm by inhabiting cadavers."

"It could work. Good system," The Doctor said, smiling.

I crossed my arms and glared. "I've already said no. Not only should it not be done, it's morally wrong." The Doctor started to retort but I snapped, "And don't use that ridiculous notion of me carrying a donor card, you twit!"

A fire flickered behind The Doctor's eyes, and I could see The Oncoming Storm rearing his ugly head. A small quiver of fear shivered in my gut before I shoved it away. I would not bow to his ruling just because he thought he was an all-knowing Time Lord. I knew what would happen should The Doctor's plan actually be taken into effect, and by God, I was going to try my hardest to prevent it.

The Doctor drew his mouth into a thin line and sneered lowly, "Honestly Dahlia, I thought you would be different than the other humans . . ."

I didn't let my guard down. Instead, I bared my own fangs in the face of The Storm. "I am being different. I'm not backing down until you see reason."

"Stop." The Doctor let more of his anger leak into his tone. Others would have tucked their tails between their legs and ran by now. I did not. He growled out the last bit, "It's different traveling with me. Get used to it or go home."

In the show, Rose backed off, terrified of what The Doctor would do next. She had been terrified of being left behind. If I was Rose, I would've backed off. If I was smart, I would shut up. If I was any other person in the world, I would never have spoken up. But I was myself, and Dahlia
Tombew did not back down when she set her mind to something, not even from The Oncoming Storm.

I had been hoping to spare The Doctor this speech, but I knew I had to say it. Oh well, better he knew what he was getting into on the second adventure rather than regretting everything on the seventh.

Uncrossing my arms, I stood ramrod straight and held my head high, glowering back into The Doctor's glare. "Doctor," I started with barely concealed anger, "Let's get this out in the open now since your Time Lord brain can't find the time to infer it on your own—I'm not going to do everything you say. Never. Not even in your wildest dreams. I am different from your other companions. I know you're not always right. I'm not innocent or naïve. I have a spine and am going to use it. So, Doctor, either you get used to that or you can take me home!" The dam had burst and now my frustration flowed freely. My composure fell away so that I was snarling instead of coolly spitting a rebuttal.

The Doctor and I stood there for several long moments, staring into each other's eyes and meeting false indifference and raging fury. Neither of us would back down.

Dickens spoke, deciding to interrupt our heated staring contest, "This new world. Oh, I was so sure of myself. The great Dickens! Every day, checking the papers for my name—such vanity. When I'm nothing but an old fool."

The Doctor reigned his anger back in and turned away from me. "At least you're learnin'."

"Learning what? That I'm a spent force? That this addle-headed scribbler is no longer of use or ornament? I didn't need you to tell me that, Doctor," Dickens lamented.

I might've felt bad for him under different circumstances.

The Doctor shifted back to me, and I prepared myself for his words.

"You heard what they said." His tone was softer, and The Oncoming Storm was calming. He was trying to reason with me like a decent person. Too bad neither of us were decent people. "Time is short. I can't worry about a few corpses when the last few gelth could be dying."

I huffed, "Doctor, it's not about the corpses, even if using them is wrong, it's—"

Gwyneth spoke up, having not made a sound, "Don't I get a say, miss?"

I turned back to Gwyneth and winced. How could I make them understand they couldn't let her open the portal? The gelth were evil liars who were taking advantage of The Doctor and Gwyneth. "It is your choice, but you don't understand . . . if you do this . . ." my voice wavered at the end and trailed off.

Understanding lit up the maid's eyes and her expression softened. She reached up and took one of my hands in both of hers. "It's alright, miss, I understand why. I can see it in your head. All those problems, and you feel like you've got to be the one to solve 'em all. This is one event you can't change," she muttered lowly so only I could hear.

My eyes widened at the last part and I shook my head, denying it, "No! I won't let you die!"

Gwyneth smiled pityingly and released my hand. She looked at The Doctor. "Doctor, what do I have to do?" she asked.
"You don't *have* to do anythin'," he responded.

"They've been singing to me since I was a child, sent by my mam on a holy mission, so tell me."

The Doctor pursed his lips as he thought, and then answered, "We need to find the Rift. This house is a weak spot, so there must be one spot that's weaker than any other. Mr. Sneed, what's the worst part of this house? The place where the most ghosts have been seen."

Mr. Sneed hesitated before nervously saying, "That would be . . . the morgue."

I listened to the exchange in horror. Was no one listening to me? They couldn't go through with this! Should I tell them what would happen if they did? Maybe then The Doctor would find another way to seal the Rift. I reached out and seized the Doctor's sleeve. "Doctor!"

He didn't answer. He just gripped my wrist and pulled me down into the morgue.

I didn't speak as our little group made its way through the creaking door and down the moldy steps into the morgue. The stench of rotting flesh and mildew clung to the air and every surrounding surface.

I wanted to say something, anything, in protest of what was about to take place, but what could I say? No one was listening to me, and The Doctor had made up his mind.

The Doctor grumbled, "Talk about bleak house."

In my despaired state of mind, I couldn't find it in myself to snap at his pathetic joke.

"Doctor," Dickens cleared his throat, "I think the room is getting colder."

Out of body whispers filled the room, getting louder and louder. The gas light from earlier formed a figure of one of the gelth. It took one look at us and shrieked in near hysterics, "You have come to help! Praise The Doctor! Praise him!"

I wanted to sneer at the figure. If only there was a way to physically strangle the fucker . . .

The figure cried out, "Hurry! Please! So little time. Pity the Gelth!"

"I'll take you somewhere else after the transfer," The Doctor said, glancing at me from the corner of his eye. "Somewhere you can build proper bodies. This isn't a permanent solution, all right?"

Was he trying to apologize in his own weird way? While sweet, it didn't solve the immediate problem.

Gwyneth, radiating with anticipation, clasped her hands in front of herself and cried out happily, "My angels! I can help them live."

"Okay, where's the weak point?" The Doctor asked.

"Here! Beneath the arch!" the gelth answered, hovering over said arch.

"Beneath the arch . . ." Gwyneth mumbled, moving past The Doctor and me toward it.

I snagged her wrist and pleaded desperately, "Gwyneth, please, don't do this . . . It's not worth it."

She smiled serenely and removed my hand. "It's fine, miss, The Wolf demands my death."
I gaped at her, horrified, and snapped, "The Wolf damn well does not demand your death! I—" I stopped myself before I could reveal that important little tidbit of information.

She shook her head with that silly smile still perched on her mouth and walked beneath the arch. "My angels!" Gwyneth called out.

Suddenly, a bright light flooded the room from behind her. I stumbled along in surprise with the others, even more so actually, since The Doctor still had a tight grip on my hand.

The gelth ordered, "Establish the bridge! Reach out to the void. Let us through!"

"Yes! I can see you. I can see you! Come!" Gwyneth beckoned.

"Bridgehead establishing . . ."

Gwyneth continued her call, "Come to me. Come to this world. Poor lost souls . . ."

The whispers of the gelth were getting louder. They added to the headache I had forming. I wanted to snap at them to shut up, but I was frozen in place.

"It has begun! The bridge is made. She has given herself to the gelth!"

Like a child, I cowered behind The Doctor and hid my face in his leather jacket, ashamed to look and see what I had failed to prevent. Hesitantly, I peeked out to see.

Gwyneth's mouth fell open, and the gelth in the guise of blue smoke poured out.

A small part in the back of my mind nagged at why they didn't cease, even though I knew why. I watched their few numbers multiply too quick to count. Soon the entire room was filled with swirling phantoms.

"That doesn't seem like a few," Dickens remarked. His tone betrayed how uneasy he suddenly felt. He had good reason, too, because as soon as he said it, the gelth showed their true nature.

Blue burned red in a flash, and their solemn faces morphed into ghastly sneers. Mocking laughter cackled in our ears. "The bridge is open. We descend! The gelth will come through in force," they shrieked with a mixture of joy and cruelty.

Dickens sputtered, "You said you were few in number!"

The gelth ridiculed, "A few billion! And all of us in need of corpses!"

I managed to get a glimpse of The Doctor's face. He was frozen. I could see horror, shock, and grief jumbled in his expression. A few minutes ago, I would've sneered an 'I told you so', but I couldn't bring myself to do it. Whether it was the fear I felt or The Doctor looking like a betrayed child, I only wanted to comfort him.

Mr. Sneed bravely stepped forward to face the gelth. "Now Gwyneth, stop this, there's a good girl. Listen to your master! This has gone far enough, now stop dabbling, child. And leave these things alone, I beg of you!" he called out desperately to Gwyneth, but I knew she couldn't hear. She was already dead.

I rushed out from my place behind The Doctor with jerky movements. "No! Mr. Sneed!" But I was too late; the gelth had invaded several corpses and had him surrounded. One wrapped their hands around his neck and began to strangle him.
I knew it was hopeless to try, but that stupid human part of me screamed at me to try goddammit! I jerked forward again, but a tight hold on my wrist stopped me. With panicked eyes, I jolted my head to see who it was.

The Doctor gave me a truly pathetic look (I couldn't name the other emotion that laid there), saying, "Don't go near—"

I heard a sickening crack and, knowing what it had signaled, barely forced myself to turn and face the newest member of the gelth.

"I have joined the legions of the gelth. Come, march with us." They gelth used Mr. Sneed to voice their horrors this time. "We need bodies. All of you—dead. The human race—dead, fit only to become our vessels. The gelth shall march in victory!"

Frantic and out of options, The Doctor begged, "Gwyneth! Stop them! Send them back!"

*Everything will be fine. Everything will be fine. You know how this ends. You know how this ends.* I chanted in my mind, clutching The Doctor's hand so tightly my bones began to ache. I heard another person mumbling and, for a second, I thought it was Dickens. Then, I realized I was the one reciting "She can't hear you. She can't hear you. She can't hear you" under my breath. I doubted even The Doctor or Dickens could hear such a low volume.

Gwyneth's mouth opened again. The gelth's voice cried, "Three more bodies! Convert them! Make them vessels for the gelth!"

I was suddenly reminded of why I hated this episode so much. The gelth sounded like children using electronic recordings over their voices. Children creeped me out on a good day, let alone one where they were actually doing something creepy! Like singing a nursery rhyme really slowly, or just staring at random things blankly, or coming from a gas creature that wanted to kill me and inhabit my body to take over the world.

Dickens had finally had enough. He struggled to the exit before the gelth blocked it. Pausing right outside the door, he said, "I-I'm sorry, Doctor! But I can't!"

Disgust burned sourly in my gut.

"I'm too old, your new world is too much for me—I'm sorry—" And with that little stumble he was gone.

The Doctor said nothing; he just gritted his teeth and drug me through the gate behind us and barring it against the gelth. We pressed ourselves against slimy and cold stone wall.

"Give yourself to glory! Sacrifice your lives to the gelth!" The corpses reached for us through the bars.

The Doctor snarled in anger, "I trusted you. I pitied you!"

Mr. Sneed's corpse scoffed, "We don't want your pity. We want this world and all its flesh."

The Doctor's grip moved from my wrist to my hand, where his fingers entangled with mine. My stomach, despite the fear and horror that gripped it, lurched happily at the contact. My skin tingled at the sensation of being so close to the Time Lord.

"Not while I'm alive," The Doctor snarled.
"Then live no more!" the gelth cried encouragingly.

Taking a shaky breath, I managed to spit out, "We're going to die here, aren't we?"

The Doctor looked at me sadly, muttering, "I'm sorry."

I shook my head, "Don't—"

"No, I should've listened to you," he interrupted. "And now you're goin' to die here with me. It's my fault. I brought you here in the first place." His head slumped in defeat and resignation at our fate.

I reached up and took his chin in my free hand. Tugging his face upward, I made him return my stare. "Shut up, Doctor. I came with you of my own free will, and unlike your other companions, I knew what I was getting into. I knew my life would be threatened on an almost daily basis and that I'd have to help save the world from monsters and aliens. I knew I'd have to be tougher than all the others because I knew what was coming each time we stepped out of the TARDIS' doors. I knew I'd have to argue with The Oncoming Storm. I knew it, but I didn't prepare myself. I should've argued harder and forced you to see it my way, but I didn't. This is just as much my fault as it is yours. Learn to share the blame every once and a while, Theta. You'll be doing a lot of it if we survive this," I said, finally releasing him.

That was the second time I'd snapped at him today. I was on a roll.

The animal grunts and snarls of the gelth were the only noise for a while before I said, "Doctor . . ."

"Yes?" he inclined his head just enough to look at me from the corner of his eye.

"Did you really see the fall of Troy?" I didn't know why I asked. It was such a silly thing to ask in the face of death.

Surprise and confusion twisted The Doctor's features before he broke into a smile. "Yeah, I did. Why do ya ask?"

A hysterical giggle broke free. I smirked. "Was it really caused because a woman named Helen was kidnapped?"

Instead of answering my question, he simply said, "I'm so glad I met you."

My smirk spread into a smile. "That makes two of us."

"Am I correct, Doctor? They're gaseous creatures—" Dickens prodded.

"Fill the air with gas—it draws them out of the host, sucks them into the air, like poison from a wound—" The Doctor cut in.
"I hope—Oh lor—!" Dickens managed to choke out before he was trapped against a wall by the grandmother and her grandson, who had busted in seconds earlier. "I rather hope this theory will be validated soon. If not immediately," Dickens wheezed.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw The Doctor take hold of a pipe and quickly held my sleeve over my mouth and nose. The Doctor ripped the pipe free from the wall. Gas immediately flooded the room.

The corpses trapping Dickens stumbled and emitted a wail. Smog plumed from their mouths as they collapsed.

Dickens cried out in both excitement and relief. "It's working!"

As the gelth were forced from the bodies around the barred door, The Doctor and I rushed out and toward Gwyneth.

"Gwyneth! Send them back! They lied. They're not angels!" The Doctor frantically spit out.

"... Liars...?" Gwyneth mumbled through the fog around her mind.

The Doctor continued, "Look at them! If your mother and father could look down and see this, they'd tell you the same. They'd give you strength. Now send them back!"

I inhaled slowly, trying not to give The Doctor any reason to have Dickens drag me outside, but a traitorous cough hacked its way out.

The Doctor immediately snapped his alarmed gaze to me. His eyes held mine for several seconds before he order, "Charles, get her out."

I stiffed. "No. I am not leaving you or her, Doctor."

"They're too strong..." Gwyneth's voice interrupted what I thought would turn into another rant. Silently, I thanked for the interruption, no matter how horrible it was; I didn't have the breath or energy for another argument.

The Doctor's head whipped back to Gwyneth and he urged, "Remember that world you saw? Dahlia's world? All those people. None of it will exist, if you don't send them back through the rift!"

"Can't... send them back. But I can hold them. Hold them in place. Hold them here..." Achingly slow, she reached into the pockets of her apron and pulled out a box of matches. "Get out..."

"No! There has to be another way!" I tried to make it sound forceful but failed. "Doctor, there has to be something you can do."

"I won't leave her while she's still in danger, okay? Now go!" The Doctor reassured, shoving me to Dickens.

Dickens gripped me tightly and forced me to follow him up the stairs and through the house. I tried to fight but, physically, I was too weak, too, even if Dickens was several decades older than me.

We broke through the door and into the snow. The Doctor followed seconds after; he didn't even pause before near tackling me to the ground and covering me with his body. Dickens scrambled to the ground and covered his head.
The house exploded. Flames licked at every available surface. I cringed from the heat; I could still feel it even with The Doctor's body on top of mine. Gas that wasn't being burned oozed into the atmosphere, contaminating the air. When The Doctor deemed it safe, he maneuvered off of me to stand and then helped me to do so. Dickens, looking more relieved than I had ever seen anyone, gave us a shaky smile but faltered when he saw no sign of Gwyneth.

"She didn't make it. She closed the rift," The Doctor said solemnly, looking at me instead of Dickens. His eyes pleaded with me to understand that there was nothing he could've done.

Dickens' breath hitched. "At such a cost. The poor child."

"Dahlia . . ." The Doctor started, but I shook my head for him to stop.

"She was dead as soon as she set foot under that arch, Doctor. I know," I whispered hoarsely. My eyes burned with the tears I knew would come. "She shouldn't have had to save us."

"'There are more things in Heaven and Earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy.' Even for you, Doctor," Dickens recited.

I wrapped my arms around myself and hunched over. "She saved the world—a servant girl, and no one will ever know."

I forced my mourning to the back on my mind when we reached the TARDIS. The Doctor stood awkwardly as he attempted to get Dickens not to follow us into the TARDIS. "If you don't mind, Charlie boy, I've just got to pop into my, um . . . shed. Won't be long."

"So," I sighed, inclining my head towards Dickens, "what're you doing to do now?"

"I shall take the mail-coach back to London, quite literally post-haste. It's the wrong time of year to be on my own. I shall spend Christmas with my family and try to make amends. After all I've seen tonight, there's nothing more vital."

The Doctor beamed and stated cheerily, "You've cheered up."

"Exceedingly! This morning, I thought I knew everything in the world. Now I know I've barely started. And what an appetite I have, Doctor! All these huge, wonderful notions! I am inspired. I must write about them!" Dickens motioned excitedly with his hands, a grin forming on his face.

I raised an eyebrow and smiled with only a slight bit of sarcasm. "Really?"

Dickens didn't notice my mocking. "Oh, I shall be subtle, at first. *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* still lacks an ending. Perhaps the killer was not the boy's uncle. Perhaps he was not of this earth! *The Mystery of Edwin Drood and the Blue Elementals!* I can spread the word and tell the truth!"

"Good luck with it," The Doctor said honestly, shaking the writer's hand. "Nice to meet you, fantastic!"

My sardonic smile shifted into a softer version as I lightly kissed Dickens' cheek.

His face flushed. "Oh my dear! How modern. Thank you. But I don't understand, in what way is this goodbye, where are you going?"

The Doctor placed a hand on my lower back and guided me toward the TARDIS. "Into the shed."

He looked back over his shoulder at Dickens. "You'll see."
Dickens almost seemed to pout. "'Pon my soul, it's one riddle after another with you. But Doctor—in amongst all the revelations, there's one mystery you haven't explained. Answer me this. Who are you?"

The Doctor chuckled. "Just a friend passing through."

"You seem to know so much of future times," Dickens thought out loud. "And I won't intrude, but I have to wonder . . . My books, Doctor. Do they last?" He seemed slightly fearful of the answer.

The Doctor smirked. "Oh yes."

"For how long?"

"Forever." The Doctor's attention turned back to me. "Right then. Shed. Come on, Dahlia."

"Both of you, inside that box?" Dickens questioned playfully, tilting his head slightly.

"Oi, mind outta the gutter," The Doctor groused without any real venom.

I finally piped up, "Oh, I don't know, Doctor, maybe he should stay there for a while. The gutter's a rather nice place once you get used to it."

The Doctor and I filed inside the TARDIS. The door swung closed after us. Silence permeated the air around us as I leaned against the railing and The Doctor flew the TARDIS into The Vortex.

Suddenly, I was angry. My sadness over Gwyneth's death had turned to fury while The Doctor and Dickens had been exchanging words. I stormed past The Doctor and down the hallway. I didn't know I was running until I was at the wardrobe. I stripped out of the dress with a ferocity that strained the fabric's stitching and then kicked the dress to an unseen corner.

In my anger-clouded mind, I couldn't find my clothing. Either I had forgotten where I had left them or the TARDIS was hiding them from me for some reason. Either way, I sat down in my underwear and fancy hair and leaned against the door.

A loud clanging made me jerk in surprise. I quickly shook off the fear, though my skin still tingled with the aftershock. The Doctor was banging on the door, pleading for me to come out and talk.

"Dahlia! Dahlia! Please, listen to me! It's not your fault! It's mine," he shouted. His voice was muffled by whatever material the door was made out of.

My temper sparked. "We've already discussed this! It's both our faults. Yours for being a stubborn ass and mine for not having the guts to stand up to you when it mattered!" I snarled.

The Doctor stopped his battering of the door. I swore I heard him sigh but that was probably my imagination.

"Dahlia, I'm sorry," he said honestly.

At his admission, I deflated. Every bit of anger left my person until the only thing left was an aching numbness.

"Yeah," I sighed. "I am, too."
"Why won't you just tell me?" The Doctor shouted at me from across the control room.

I whirled around and snarled back, "We've already had this discussion! It's not up for debate dammit!" I spun back around and stomped away.

But The Doctor wouldn't let the argument drop so easily. He was nearly in Oncoming Storm mode and nothing would stop him until he got his way.

"Oh no, you don't!" he growled.

I heard him shove off the console and follow me. Blind with rage, I ignored him and continued down the TARDIS' hallways. I had no idea where I was going. I vaguely recognized a few of the doors, but other than the odd splash of color, I was lost. That didn't matter to me, though. The only thing that mattered was that I lost The Doctor. If he'd just let me cool off for a while, I could control my urge to punch him in his fuckin' face for being so stupid.

"Dahlia! Dahlia! Dammit, Dahlia, don't you dare ignore me!" The Doctor's voice echoed toward me. It was closer than I expected and much closer than I wanted.

No matter how much I wanted to scream at him, I refused to respond. He wanted me to argue with him. He wanted me to get angry so that I would say something that would prove him right. Well, I wouldn't let him.

The TARDIS let out a soft sound. A mixture of sadness and annoyance trickled down my spine. The old girl had already "voiced" her displeasure at us fighting many times, but we were both ignoring her.

We were both acting like children, and we knew it. Of course, that didn't mean we were going to stop.

"Fuck," I cursed. I had managed to trap myself in a dead end. There was no time to back track or even dash into one of the nearby rooms, because as soon as I said that one word, The Doctor was upon me.

Both of his hands crashed onto the metal wall on either side of my head. I could feel his labored breathing, from anger, not fatigue, on my neck. I spun to face him. I wouldn't be a coward and not face him head on.

Flaming mint green met raging ice blue. The Doctor and I stood there for several tense moments, merely glaring and waiting for the other to back down. When neither of us did, The Doctor hissed out, "Why won't you just agree?"

"Because," I sneered, "It's dangerous and goes against everything we both stand for."

"It could save lives," he growled back.


He opened his mouth but then seemed to think better of whatever he was going to say. Then he said, "I'm a Time Lord! I can deal with this! You're a human. You lot weren't meant for that kind of responsibility!"
I grimaced. Out of everything he could've said that was what he picked? God, The Doctor must've been losing IQ points faster than I thought.

"We've been over this, too! I have my burdens and you have yours! Stop treating me like a naïve child! I've told you before. I'm not one of your little companions who you can sweep away to show the wonders of the universe to. I know the universe isn't all magic and sparkles. I know people are going to die, possibly because of some mistake I'm going to make in the future, and I'll take full responsibility for that. I'm not going to cower behind you while you take care of all my problems," I ranted, panting when I finished. I'd been shouting at the end. My vocal cords stung.

The Doctor looked taken aback by my words. I had even managed to get him to flinch.

He seemed to realize that he had lost this battle, because the fury suddenly drained from his body, causing him to have to support himself on the wall instead of trapping me against it.

"You shouldn't have to do this alone," he whispered, bowing his head until our foreheads nearly touched. His eyes were sad and pleading.

My anger started to leave me, as well. I tried to keep as much in as possible by clenching my fists and gritting my teeth; I even thought of random things that pissed me off to light the fire again, but nothing helped. Not with The Doctor's pitiable stare baring down on me.

I slumped over and looked at the ground. Sighing with a mixture of pity and disappointment, I said, "You're such a hypocrite, Doctor."

Shock made him jolt. The Doctor gaped at me; the hurt in his eyes made me cringe, but I continued in a soft voice.

"You say I shouldn't do this alone, yet you carry a weight no one should ever have to shoulder," I whispered, choking on my words. "It's hypocritical of you to say I can't handle myself when you can hardly stand under your own burden. Even if I asked right now, you wouldn't tell me what's bothering you or share the darkest corners of your mind with me.

"And you don't need to. I understand that you have your secrets. Yes, it's nice that you want to help, but you have to understand, Doctor, that I'm not the emotionally needy type. I can hold myself up and do what needs to be done on my own." I exhaled heavily and squeezed the bridge of my nose with two fingers. "Just because you have more experience with this doesn't mean you have a right to the information. Keeping the universe from imploding is my job, and part of that is keeping you from knowing the future. You should know how dangerous it would be if you knew what was going to happen."

The Doctor hung his head. "I know."

"Besides, if you knew, you'd take precautions and sooner or later, the time line would get so screwed up even I wouldn't be able to tell what would happen next," I added.

"I know," he repeated.

The Doctor raised one of his arms and pressed a fist to his forehead. "I'm sorry," he whispered.

I laid a hand on his shoulder and muttered, "I know."
The past few days had been . . . awkward, to say that least. The Doctor and I had managed to not really speak to each other at all in over a week, including when we stopped on alien planets! The Doctor had a storm cloud of shame over his head, and I just didn't know what to say. So, I made a suggestion instead.

"Doctor, take me back to Cardiff," I said from over the console.

His head snapped up. His face made a desperate attempt to stay neutral but his eyes bared his disbelief.

"What?" he muttered, "Sorry? Don't think I heard you right."

"Take me back to Cardiff," I repeated. I winced when hurt joined his disbelief.

The Doctor's shoulders slumped and his head dropped. "Didn't think you'd get tired of adventurin' already." He tried to chuckle but failed. "Well, all right, I'll take ya back, but . . . Dahlia, is this about . . . our argument a few days ago? Because I really am sorry about that! And I'll never under estimate you again, promise!"

I frowned. "It's not about that."

His expression, which had risen with hope became crestfallen once again. My heart ached with confused guilt.

"Well . . . I guess the only thing I can say is . . . Thank you, for bein' a fantastic companion and, um, I'm goin' to . . ." The Doctor was steadily becoming more depressed and frantic as he searched for words.

In horror, I realized we'd both been mistaken. "No! Doctor, no! I'm not leaving!"

He froze and blinked rapidly. "What?"

"I'm still going to be your companion! I just want to go back and visit Ashley, Jackie, and Mickey for a bit!" I said, clenching my fists against the cool metal of the console.

"Oh," The Doctor mumbled, looking down and flushing.

I, too, flushed red, embarrassed beyond belief.

Neither of us spoke for a long time. A tumbleweeds would have more to say right now than either of us.

"So, um . . ." The Doctor stuttered. "You want to pop in for a visit?"

I cleared my throat nervously. "Yeah, just for a bit."

He beamed at me. "Off we go then!"

The Doctor was trying to seem nonchalant, but I could see just how relieved and happy he was to know I wasn't leaving him. A smile broke out on my lips, as well, and soon I was giggling. The Doctor looked up from rotating several dials to flash me a grin and a wink. That only made me laugh harder. The Doctor flipped three switches, and the TARDIS' engines roared; we soared
through The Vortex.

I released my grip on the console when we landed. My smile hadn't dropped throughout our flight and stayed put when I asked, "How long have I been gone?"

"To them? Only twelve hours," The Doctor replied. His smugness seeped through.

Smirking, I raised an eyebrow and coyly asked, "Only twelve hours?"

"Yep!" He popped the p, "Why? Do ya doubt me?"

"No, no, not at all! It just seems a bit . . . on target for you," I teased, running my tongue over my lower lip.

The Doctor immediately defended himself, "Do ya really think so little of me tha' I can't even fly me own TARDIS?"

"No . . . well, yes. You never did read the instruction manual, and you hardly seem to go where or when you aim." I snickered at his pouting. "Come on, Doctor, I was just joking."

He wrinkled his nose. "Ha ha ha."

I gathered up my bag and moved towards the doors. "You could come with me. I'm sure Jackie would love to meet you." Magnificently, I held in my smirk.

The Doctor looked disgusted. "Domestics," he grumbled. The nasty look didn't stay long, though; soon, he was curious. "What're ya gonna tell her and your friend?"

I sighed and scratched behind my ear. "Well, I'm hoping there are only a few things I'll need to explain. That is, if Mickey gave Ashley the letter like I told him to."

The Doctor cocked an eyebrow, inquiring, "And if he didn't?"

"Then there'll be hell to pay," I said airily. "I'll see you in a bit." I slipped out the doors but popped my head back in. "And don't go anywhere. I swear, if I come back and find out you've gone wandering off, I'll smack you."

He scoffed, "Like I'd even think about it!"

I grinned. "Good."

It didn't take long for me to get to the Tyler residence, even strolling along as I did. A part of me wondered why I was taking my sweet time—Ashley and Jackie thought I'd been gone for a year and would be worried sick. The other part knew I was giving The Doctor a bit more time to figure out that he'd messed up.

I knocked on the door to Jackie and Ashley's flat, rocking back on my heels and humming as I waited.

The door opened. Ashley stood in the doorway. Her annoyed look quickly shifted to shock. She stood there gaping, eyes wide and mouth flapping like a fish out of water.

Grinning, I threw my arms out wide and said, "I'm back!"
Ashley didn't say anything. She looked like she was starting to hyperventilate.

My grin slowly turned into a frown. "Ashley, are you all right?" I asked quietly, shuffling forward until I could place a hand on her shoulder.

Like someone had flipped a switch, Ashley launched herself at me, wrapping me in a tight grip, and began sobbing into my shirt.

_Oh God, she's crying. Why is it always me she ends up crying on?_ I thought as I tried to calm my inner panic.

"Shh, Shhh, it's all right. See? I'm fine, you're fine, we're both fine. No need to cry." I was babbling and not being much of a comfort, but really, what did she expect? I didn't expect her to start crying when I knocked on the door!

Heavy footsteps clomped up the stairs. The Doctor rushed to my side. He paused to grin apologetically. "It's not twelve hours, it's twelve months. Sorry."

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I sat on the Tylers' couch with Ashley curled up at my side, still clutching me close to her. She'd stopped crying but refused to let go. Livid, Jackie paced back and forth while she ranted. The Doctor stood right behind my spot on the couch; occasionally, I felt his knuckles soothingly stroke my shoulder, but most his attention was on the raving Jackie. A policeman was there, too. He was supposed to be taking statements, but mostly he just listened.

"The hours Ashley and I sat here, days and weeks and months just worrying. We thought you were dead. And where were you? Traveling. What the hell does that mean? Traveling? That's no sort of answer," Jackie shouted. She whirled around to face the policeman. "You ask her. She won't tell me! That's all she says. Travelling."

I piped up, "Jackie, I'm telling you the truth. I was traveling with my friend."

The older blonde woman huffed, "When your passport's still at home? Ashley and I checked your flat! It's just one lie after another!"

I frowned. "I don't see why you're so upset. I warned you I might be gone for a while."

Jackie's face turned furious again. "Whaddaya mean you warned us? You didn't warn us 'bout nothin'!"

Furrowing my eyebrows, I scowled and demanded, "You didn't read my note? It would've explained everything."

No one spoke, but the glare Jackie was giving me told me she nor Ashley never received my very important explanation.

"Mickey," I hissed out through my teeth. Ways to kill him swiftly piled up in my mind.

The Doctor cleared his throat. He nervously shifted from foot to foot. "Actually, it's my fault. I sort of, er, employed Dahlia as my companion."

The policeman raised an eyebrow and looked at both of us before settling on The Doctor. "When you say 'companion', is this a sexual relationship?" he asked.
I barely stopped myself from blurting out 'I wish!' in time to agree with The Doctor's sputtered "No!"

Jackie zeroed in on poor Nine in full force. I would've helped him, really, I would've, but who wants to get in between Jackie and someone she's pissed off at?

"Then what is it? Because you, you waltz in here all charm and smiles, and the next thing I know, she vanishes off the face of the earth! How old are you then? 40? 45? What, you find them on the Internet? Did you go online and pretend you're a doctor?" Jackie accused.

"I am a doctor!" The Doctor snapped back.

"Prove it! Stitch this, mate." She reared back and slapped him across his face.

The Doctor and I slipped off to the roof as quickly as we could. I sat on the edge of a vent with The Doctor leaning against it to my left.

"What're ya goin' to tell them now?" he asked quietly.

I sighed heavily. "I don't really know. I wasn't planning on telling Jackie anything. I was going to leave that up to Ashley. I told Mickey to give the letter to her, anyway. Even then, I didn't tell her much, just that I was from another dimension and what I was here to do. I told her that you were an alien and that I'd be traveling with you for an indefinite amount of time, if that's all right," I muttered.

He shrugged. "Yeah, I guess it is."

Sighing again, I stated, "It doesn't feel like I've been gone a year."

"The wonders of time travel."

"And your horrible driving."

"Oi! Don't get smart with me!"

"I knew you'd get it wrong anyway, so what's the point in denying it?"

The Doctor was indignant. "You knew? Then why didn't you tell me, I could've flown us back to the right time!"

Huffing out yet another sigh, I rolled my head over to meet his eyes and answered, "Because, this is how it's supposed to be. The first time I come back to visit you land the TARDIS a year later than you were supposed to. This is how it happens."

The Doctor pouted silently for a few seconds before asking, "So, if it's so much trouble, are you gonna stay here now?"

I shook my head. "No, I'll give them a better warning this time. Actually explain a few things before I go bouncing off with you again."

"Good, because she's not comin' with us. Not too sure 'bout that friend of yours, but her mum's stayin' here."
I snickered, crinkling my nose as I laughed. The Doctor joined in but with a fuller laugh than mine.

"She slapped you!" I giggled. "I never thought I'd actually get to see that!"

"I don't do families. Nine hundred years of time and space, and I've never been slapped by someone's mother," he commented, lightly touching the cheek Jackie had slapped.

"I find that hard to believe," I mocked, smirking and leering at the Time Lord.

He gave me another affronted look before he turned serious. "Dahlia, we really haven't discussed how . . . different I am from humans," he said carefully.

I shrugged. "What's to discuss?" I really didn't see a point in going over things I already knew, but if The Doctor thought it was important enough to bring up, I'd endure for him. "I know you have two hearts, a respiratory bypass, and have telepathic powers. You can regenerate twelve times—you're currently on your ninth. You don't need as much food or sleep as humans do and have a lot more energy and stamina than we do, too. I'm not sure if you have super senses or strength, those weren't really mentioned other than you being able to identify the specifics of certain gases and liquids in tasting them. Oh, and you can absorb certain nuclear energies and expel them into, say, your shoe. Anything I missed?" I rattled off my knowledge of Time Lord Biology as I stared up at a cloud passing overhead.

"Only one. I don't age," he muttered.

"Oh, yeah. I already know you're nine hundred years old, Doctor. I still don't see what the problem is," I replied in a bored tone.

"You don't care?" he asked, shocked.

I groaned in annoyance. "God, you're persistent. No! I don't care. Why should I? I can't change how old you are, so there's no point in . . . Well, would ya look at that," I stared straight at an incoming spaceship before ducking down instinctively to avoid it as it flew out of control.

The Doctor and I snapped around to watch the smoking ship as it crashed into Big Ben (the clock let out an obnoxiously long clong! when it happened) and then splashed into the Thames.

"I was wondering when that thing would show up," I said absentmindedly, leaning over the wall at the edge of the roof and staring at the smoldering remains peeking out of the water.

The Doctor leaned farther out than I did with a grin that threatened to split his face in half. He looked like a kid at Christmas. Gripping my hand, he rushed down the many flights of stairs with me in tow to get a better look down at street level.

Unfortunately, The Doctor's plan didn't account for all the traffic. Though, he should have known we wouldn't be able to get as close to it as he wanted to.

Cars were crammed as close as they could get to each other. People were out in the streets, trying to do the same thing we were. Soldiers stood at attention, blocking off access to London.

We stopped in the middle of the sidewalk. I panted heavily as I tried to catch my breath. Even after all this time, I still wasn't used to running around. The Doctor didn't notice my exhaustion; he just kept up his loony grinning. With an ecstatic laugh, he exclaimed, "I can't believe I'm here to see this! This is fantastic!"

"Yes, yes, yes, history in the making. What a joy it is to run through the streets and be glared at by
terrifying soldiers as the people of London freak the fuck out over the giant spaceship they just saw crash into Big Ben. Oh yes, Doctor, I can definitely see why you're so happy," I muttered sourly. I stuffed my hands into the pockets of my blue Star Trek hoodie.

The Doctor gave me an irritated glance. "I'm not going to let you ruin this."

I smiled sarcastically. "Too late."

"Dahlia, this is what I travel for! To see history happening right in front of us. How can you not be amazed by it?" he said exasperatedly, gesturing to everything happening around us.

A corner of my mouth quirked upwards. "I'll be amazed when we get back to Ashley's flat," I said, spinning on my heel and marching back the way we came.

I could feel his repulsed look. "Why would you want to go back there?"

Looking over my shoulder, I said, "Well, they do have a TV. I thought we could, you know, use it to see what's going on like normal people."

His astonished expression was all it took for me to burst out laughing.

"Dahlia?" Ashley whispered, tugging on my sleeve to get my attention. She had been unnaturally quiet since my return, only making quiet whimpers when my shifting put just the slightest bit of space between us. She looked even more pathetic than the day The Doctor had blown up Henrik's. I knew she needed to talk with me, but the spaceship crashing had distracted the entire household. Even Jackie had been silent when The Doctor had first turned on the TV; of course, then she had leaped for the telephone to start calling up everyone she knew to gossip.

"Hm?" I hummed, not taking my eyes off the TV.

"What," she swallowed thickly, "what's going on?"

I stiffened. Shit. I hadn't really planned on explaining things to her. That was what the note was for goddammit. I was prepared for the questions she would have when I got back, not explaining everything. Because that's what she meant; sure, she cared about the spaceship that had just remodeled Big Ben, but Ashley, no matter how blonde she was, could tell when something bigger was going on right in front of her, and she knew I was right at the center of it.

I sighed irritably, pinching the bridge of my nose and rubbing my eyes to fight off an incoming headache.

The News 24 anchorman gave his report: "Big Ben destroyed as a UFO crash lands in Central London. Police reinforcements are drafted in from across the country to control wide-spread panic, looting and civil disturbance. A state of national emergency has been declared. Tom Hitchinson is at the scene. The police urge the public not to panic. There's a help line number on screen right now if you're worried about friends or family. The army is sending divers into the wreck of the spaceship. No one knows what they're going to find."

I opened my mouth to reply to Ashley, but Jackie burst into the room, shrilly complaining to Marianna, a visiting neighbor, "I've got no choice! Either I make him welcome, or we run the risk of never seeing her again."
I rolled my eyes. *Oh please, like The Doctor would deny me if I asked to come and visit.*

Marianna had been very outspoken (bitchy) about her disapproval of my running off with a strange man. I kindly told her I didn't give a fuck.

"Oi! I'm tryin' to listen!" The Doctor snapped irritably over his shoulder, glaring at the two gossiping women.

Huffing slightly, I muttered back to Ashley, "When everyone's not so snappy, we'll sneak off, and I'll answer as best I can."

I watched her to make sure she understood and finally turned back to the television when Ashley nodded slowly. The screen snapped to a live reporter.

"They've found a body," the elderly reporter stated grimly.

The Doctor straightened slightly, his eyebrows shooting up over his forehead.

"It's unconfirmed, but I'm being told a body has been found in the wreckage—a body of non-terrestrial origins. It's being brought ashore." Immediately the camera shifted away from the reporter and focused to the moving objects in the distance. People were rolling a stretcher away; whatever or whoever was on it was covered by a large white sheet.

Jackie entered the room again, this time with a bottle of wine and another cup of tea in hand. The Doctor scowled at the woman who was interrupting his research. I twisted so I was looking over the back of the couch and took a glance around the room. My eyes went wide. Holy shit! When had those people gotten here? The only person I had heard enter was Marianna. The Doctor seemed to agree with me because his glare of doom was now focused on each one of the neighbors. Jackie paid him no mind, ignoring the three of us on the couch in favor of chatting about her love life.

"Oh, guess who asked me out—Billy Crewe!"

The Doctor gritted his teeth in annoyance and shook his head, turning back to the TV.

The anchorman, unaware of the drama at the Tyler residence, loyally continued reporting, "Unconfirmed reports say that the body *is* of extra-terrestrial origin. An extraordinary event unfolding here, live in Central London. The body is being transferred to a secure UNIT mortuary, whereabouts as yet unknown."

A little boy wandered in and swiped the remote. Suddenly, we were all tortured by the image of a chef making a spaceship cake. The Doctor immediately attempted to snatch the remote back, but the toddler must've been part ninja, because he dodged The Doctor easily. Insulted that he had been outwitted by a child (a human child at that), The Doctor glowered at the boy then started wrestling him for control of the all mighty clicker.

Smirking, I amused myself by watching the exchange, snickering when the child nearly smacked The Doctor in the eye.

The Doctor didn't take too kindly to that. Once the remote was back in his possession, he sent me an evil glare. I merely sniggered again and stuck my tongue out playfully. The Time Lord snorted disdainfully and changed the channel back to the news; the toddler was perched in his lap, looking quite put out at being forced to watch "stupid adult stuff", as were his words.

"We still don't know whether it's alive or dead. Whitehall is denying everything. But the body has been brought here, Albion Hospital, the roads closed off. It's the closest to the river," the reporter
The little boy seemed to take that as a cue to stand directly in front of the TV. I don't really like the news either, but seriously? Standing in front of the TV? Even I classify that as a grade-A asshole move. And no, it didn't matter that the kid was, like, three. He might've been a young asshole, but he was still an asshole.

Evidently, The Doctor agreed, because his arm immediately snapped up to angrily point off to the side. "Go on!" he snapped crossly. The boy gave him a stubborn look for a second before stomping off.

My smirk was back in full force and I was giggling. I hadn't really noticed how much I was laughing and smiling while with The Doctor until now (granted, I was snickering at his distress and  smirking  rather than  smiling,  but you get the idea). I nearly hugged the ridiculous man for simply  being himself, but I stopped myself at the last moment. Instead, I teased him. "Oooo look who's being a grouchy father-figure." I was rewarded with yet another glare. Perhaps I should've been keeping count; it didn't seem natural for one person to glare at a friend that much.

I tuned back into reality at just the right time to watch a new reporter come on screen to stand right in front of 10 Downing Street.

"Mystery still surrounds their whereabouts of the prime minister. He's not been seen since the emergency began. The opposition is criticizing his lack of leadership. Hold on . . ."

The camera focused on a black haired, fat man exiting a car. The man glanced at the cameras for a moment before entering 10 Downing Street.

"Oh—that's Joseph Green, MP for Hartley Dale. He's chairman of the parliamentary commission on the monitoring of sugar standards in exported confectionary. With respect, hardly the most important person right now."

I snorted with held in laughter. The Doctor and Ashley gave me odd looks. Giggling, I said, "He must really enjoy his job."

They deadpanned. "Did you just make a fat joke?" The Doctor asked incredulously.

I confirmed his suspicions with a grin.

Ashley sighed heavily. "Not cool, Dahlia, not cool," she muttered.

After several hours, the neighbors all went home and The Doctor decided he'd had enough of the news. As he tried to sneak out the backdoor, I intercepted him, arms crossed over my chest, hip jutted out, and a reprimanding stare burning holes into his head. He twitched nervously as he held my stare.

"And where do you think you're sneaking off to?" I questioned sternly, narrowing my eyes.

The Doctor flinched and shuffled his feet, taking the opportunity to turn his gaze to the floor. "I was, ah . . . Just, you know . . . poppin' out for a bit o' air," he stammered uncertainly.

"That's right, make him sweat. Thinking he can just run off and leave me here while he goes and has an adventure. Shame on him."
I scarcely fought the smile down, forcing it to come out as an amused smirk. "Oh really? And would this 'poppin' out' lead you to the TARDIS for a little trip?"

His eyes went wide and snapped up to mine. Flushing a very pretty, dark pink, The Doctor fumbled over his words until he finally mumbled out a quiet "I was gonna tell you".

"Mhmm," I hummed sarcastically, as if I actually believed him. "And I dish out happiness and glitter wherever we go."

His shoulder slumped in defeat. Then he started pouting. Ugh. I hated when he pouted. Made me feel like a sleaze bag for stomping on his cheerfulness. I guess I could let him off the hook.

I smiled. "Well, have fun!"

He frowned in confusion. "You don't want to come?"

I shrugged. "I don't have to go with you. No one did in the show. I'm not needed for this part, anyway. Nothing life threatening happens. Besides, I've got a few . . . domestics I need to take care of here. So you can take your time on your solo trip."

"You aren't mad?" He was both wary and highly suspicious. I could see it in his eyes. He thought I was keeping something from him.

"Nope! Don't really have a reason to. You're supposed to sneak out. Not your fault I know everything," I explained, rocking back on my heels. "Have fun, don't die, don't rip the universe apart, and don't do anything stupid."

Beaming, The Doctor swept me into a hug. I started blushing just as badly as he had earlier. A hug.

I love hugs. Why don't I hug him more? I should do that. He wouldn't mind. The Doctor loves hugs.

I don't know how long we stood like that, but it was long enough for my head to get fuzzy from inhaling his scent like a drug.

"Be good while I'm gone," he said, tweaking my nose and releasing me.

Desperately, I tried to regain my senses so I wouldn't look like a complete moron. I managed to scrape up a "That's my line, idiot" before the TARDIS was disappearing.

I wandered back inside, still slightly intoxicated on The Doctor's scent. I knew I had a stupid smile on my face when I entered the Tyler flat. I probably looked like a lovesick fool.

Someone shuffled into the room. I sobered quickly when I realized it was Ashley. I needed to get this done. Her posture, her expression, and her eyes—they all burned with questions. Now I could give her the answers she deserved. Straightening my spine, I marched toward Ashley's room, grabbing her hand and dragging her along when I passed her. I made sure to lock the door as soon as we were both in the bedroom. While I could handle Ashley on her own, there was no way in hell I would be able to control two distraught and confused Tyler women.

I relocated a chair so I could face the bed and sat down. Ashley stiffly sat on her bed.

I took a deep breath. "Okay, before you start pummeling me with questions, let me try and explain as much as I can," I paused until Ashley nodded in compliance to my request, "First, I'm from a different dimension. Second, where I'm from, there's a show called Doctor Who. All this alien stuff
that's been happening, that's what the show's about—The Doctor saving innocents from bad aliens, traveling around the universe, and things like that. Third, in all technicalities, you, your family, and associates were characters on the show. Yes, I do know you're real, but this is a different universe. Please don't interrupt.

"So, like I was saying, I'm from a universe where all the stuff that happens to The Doctor is a TV show. One day, a lightning storm happened. I went to investigate and got kidnapped. I can't tell you who it was who kidnapped me, so don't ask. My kidnapper brought me here to fix this dimension. Are you following? Cuz it doesn't look like you're following. Don't glare at me! I know you don't follow science stuff very well! Back to the point. This dimension was breaking apart because someone who was supposed to be here wasn't. I was brought to take her place and fix everything. Did you get that?"

Ashley gave me a blank look that clearly asked 'Should I call the nice men in white?' I wanted to smack her.

"What don't you get? I explained it in the simplest way possible! How could you not get it?" I groaned, covering my face with my hands.

"Dahlia," Ashley started uncertainly, "There's no such thing as different dimensions. I know you're excited about aliens being real—I'm still not sure if that's true or not—but isn't this going a little far?"

I scowled at her. "Ashley, for once in your life, get your head out of your ass and just trust me for once."

She gaped like a fish, stunned at my barbed tone and frustrated glare. "Oh God," she whispered as it dawned on her. "You—you're serious! You're from another dimension, and all this is a TV show! Oh God!" Her hand flew up to cover her mouth and shush a startled cry from heard by Jackie.

Sighing, I nodded and muttered, "I'm sorry to drop that on you like that. It wasn't supposed to be like this. I wrote a letter—an entire three pages—that would explain a lot of things so you could get used to this while I was gone but . . ."

"What ha-happened to it?" Ashley whimpered.

Oh. Oh, I-I hadn't actually thought she would be capable of speech right now. When the Nestene Consciousness was here, all she could do was panic and cry. Pride swelled in my chest. Ashley was getting better at handling the real world; she was growing up. Yes, she still thought and acted like a child, but she was trying and that's what mattered.

"I don't know," I said, frowning. What had happened to it? Mickey wasn't really stupid enough to ignore me when I told him to give the letter to Ashley, was he? "I told Mickey to give it to you—"

Ashley's face contorted in fury. "Next time I see 'im, I'll kill 'im."

I laughed. Of course, I should've known. The only way to cheer her up would be to make her mad.

"So . . . Where have you and The Doctor been all this time?" Ashley asked quietly, both curious and afraid of what my answer would be.

I smiled softly. I'd have to ease her into this, too. "First, I need to tell you a few things about The Doctor. He's . . . Well, he's an alien. We'll go ahead and put that out there. And no, he doesn't look like us, we look like him. He's from a different planet that he doesn't like to talk about so don't ask."
"He's an alien?" she asked shrilly.

"A nice one," I added.

Taking a shuddering breath, and then another one, Ashley cleared her throat. "I'll try to accept that."

"He also has a spaceship/time machine called the TARDIS. It stands for Time and Relative Dimension in Space. He can go anywhere, anytime that he pleases, if he could actually fly it correctly," I continued. "It looks like a blue box but don't let the exterior fool you, it's full of all sorts of surprises. You remember when you went inside it that one time?"

And then I told her about the adventures. I really wasn't one for storytelling, but Ashley was the best kind of audience. She was so expressive and knew exactly when to ask a question and when to be quiet. I told her everything I remembered. Okay, lying. I'm a liar. I purposefully left out my and The Doctor's telepathy session and the kiss. It was for the best, of course. If I told her, she'd never shut up about it.

After I finished, she just sat there, processing all the information I'd given her. Finally, after a long few moments, she said, "Wow."

I giggled. "Yeah."

"Just...wow."

"You've been off doin' all that, and I've been here, bein' all normal," Ashley laughed. "Really puts things into perspective."

I nodded. "Oh yeah."

The front door opened and slammed shut. Jackie greeted whoever it was and the newcomer gave a short reply. Rushed footsteps made their way to Ashley's bedroom. Whoever was stomping through the apartment began knocking harshly on Ashley’s door; so much so that I thought they'd break it down.

Ashley immediately stood from the bed and opened the door. Mickey burst inside the room, out of breath and glaring. At me.

"You!" he snapped, stiffly pointing at me.

"Me?" I prodded innocently.

"Yes, you! What were you thinkin'? Runnin' off like that! Do ya know what they did to me? The police interrogated me! They thought I'd gone an' killed you!" Mickey shouted furiously.

I blinked slowly and stared at him uninterestedly. "Where's the note I gave you right before I left?"

"The note? You're worried about that bloody note when I was accused of bein' a killer?"

"Yes," I said dully. "Because if you had just given it to Ashley, none of this would've happened. So, I'll ask again. Where is the note?"

That made him shut up. The indignant look on his face became panicked and I just knew he'd done
something stupid.

"I-I-I . . ." he stuttered rapidly.

I rose from my seat and took a warning step toward him. "Mickey, what did you do?" I seethed, narrowing my eyes in irritation.

"I," Mickey cleared his throat, "I-I didn't give it to her." His voice was so quiet I could barely hear him.

"Why not?" I growled.

"Because! That stuff you wrote! She never would've believed it!" Mickey defended, inching back through the door.

"You weren't supposed to read it, you moron!" I shrieked. I started toward him. There would be one less idiot in Cardiff after I was done with him.

Just when I was close enough to nearly get my hands wrapped around his throat, a grinding sound met my ears. The Doctor, he's back, I thought. I shoved past Mickey and tore out of the flat. I didn't understand why I was so relieved he was back. I knew he would return. Hell, I had been the one to give him permission to go off alone! But it still felt like I'd been left behind. Abandoned. It was an irrational thought but still a thought. It was also a thought I shoved to the back on my mind when I finally made it outside. There was the TARDIS; The Doctor hadn't exited yet. He was probably running tests since now he knew the entire crash landing was faked.

I shoved the TARDIS doors open, stepped inside, and . . . Yep, there he was, staring intently at a monitor and frowning.

He looked up at me when he heard the doors open. Grinning, he waved me over excitedly, "Guess what? The whole crash landing's a fake! Knew it was too perfect. I mean, hitting Big Ben. Come on."

"Oh, my God" came a shocked whisper from behind me.

I spun on my heel to see Ashley gaping in the doorway. "Ashley—"

She cut me off, "My mum's here."

Jackie and Mickey entered as soon as she got out the words.

"Oh, that's just what I need!" The Doctor snorted.

I looked back at The Doctor, slightly startled by his outburst. I had been too busy praying Jackie wouldn't make a scene.

He pointed at me, ordering, "Don't you dare let them make this place domestic."

"Wouldn't dream of it, Doctor."

Mickey stomped forward, glowering at The Doctor. "You ruined my life, Doctor. They thought she was dead. I was a murder suspect because of you."

Ashley and Jackie shuffled around the console room, gawking in bewilderment and astonishment; Jackie more so than Ashley, surprisingly. Ashley's eyes occasionally flickered over to me.
The Doctor turned to me, wrinkling his nose and frowning. "See what I mean? Domestic!" he cried exasperatedly before turning back to the monitor in a huff. He ignored Mickey as the human approached him.

"I bet you don't even remember my name!" Mickey accused.

The Doctor glanced up for just a second and then returned to the computer. "Ricky."

"It's Mickey."

"No, it's Ricky."

"I think I know my own name," Mickey spat.

The Doctor snorted. "You think you know your own name? How stupid are you?"

I groaned and face palmed. "Doctor," I groaned, "what did I tell you about being rude?"

Jackie chose that moment to give into her mind's natural freak out time and rushed from the TARDIS.

"Mum!" Ashley called out, running after her.

I expected her to come back, but she didn't. Maybe she was using her mother's freak out as an excuse to go have her own. I wouldn't blame her if she was; she had been awfully accommodating lately and needed a bit of time on her own.

Shaking my head, I groaned and rubbed my forehead, attempting to soothe the headache I could already feel forming. I shuffled over to The Doctor's right side, peering at the screen that held his attention.

Mickey sidled closer, attempting to get a closer look at the computer. "That was a real spaceship."

"Yep!" The Doctor chirped.

"What? You two think they're invading?" I snorted. I knew they didn't, but it was fun to tease them.

Mickey frowned, muttering his derisive thoughts out loud, "Funny way to invade, putting the world on red alert."

The Doctor gave him an appraising look. He obviously hadn't expected Mickey to deduce something like that. I knew it was horrible, but I would normally agree with The Doctor. Mickey wasn't exactly the brightest crayon in the box; though, he could have his moments.

"Good point!" The Doctor noted. "So, what're they up to?"

He knelt and lifted a panel on the floor before laying in his back, screwdriver in his mouth, to fiddle with several multicolored wires that dangled above his head. I stood at his side with my hands in my hoodie, looking as if I was waiting to assist him—really, I was standing in the best vantage point in which to watch if he made some mistake that would end in the TARDIS shocking him as punishment.

Mickey, however, was curious as to what The Doctor was doing, and peered down to inquire, "So, what're you doing down there?"

"Ricky." The Doctor attempted to sound scolding, but the sonic in his mouth muffled his voice,
only succeeding in making him sound ridiculous.

Deciding to be helpful, I gingerly removed the sonic from The Doctor's mouth so he could speak properly. It might've not been the best idea; my fingers managed to brush against The Doctor's mouth, sending electricity coursing through my body and causing my heart to pound. I kept my gaze on the floor next to The Doctor's head.

"Thank you," he said quickly, flashing me a quick smile before looking at Mickey. "If I was to tell you what I was doing to the controls of my frankly magnificent time ship, would you even begin to understand?"

"I suppose not . . ." Mickey mumbled.

"Well, shut it, then," The Doctor ordered.

"Rude," I admonished him quietly, kicking him lightly in the side.

He pouted briefly but was swiftly distracted by some technical thing under the console.

I held the screwdriver dutifully, handing it to The Doctor whenever he asked for it. Mickey didn't seem to care what the alien was doing anymore and silently wandered around the room, examining every little detail. Every once in a while, he'd turn around to give the Time Lord the stink eye.

Finally, The Doctor fixed whatever needed to be fixed. A shower of sparks flashed brightly around his hands briefly before dying away. The Doctor grinned widely, saying, "Got it! Ha!"

The Doctor was rambling before Mickey had walked back to us. " Patched in the radar, looped it back twelve hours so we can follow the flight of the spaceship, here we go . . . hold on . . ." He smacked the monitor. "Come on!"

I frowned. "Don't hit her, Doctor! She doesn't like that!"

He scoffed and pointed to the glowing dot now on the screen. "That's the spaceship on its way to Earth . . . See? Except . . . Hold on . . . See, the spaceship did a sling shot round the Earth before it landed."

"What does that mean?"

"It means it came from Earth in the first place—it went up and came back down. Whoever those aliens are, they haven't just arrived. They've been here for a while. The question is—what have they been doing?" The Doctor glanced at me. He searched my face for any information I might've been giving away. I kept my face blank except for the slightly curious tilt of my head.

The Doctor, ever the impatient one, gave up and began flipping through the channels on the monitor.

Mickey had apparently filled his Smart meter because he executed a perfect combo move of stupidity. "How many channels do you get? You get sports channels?"

I wanted to smack him, so I did.

Mickey glared at me. "What the hell was that for?"

My eye twitched irritably. "For being a moron."

Mickey started to retort but The Doctor cut him off. "Hold on. I know that bloke."
An unseen reporter spoke, "It is looking likely that the government is bringing in alien specialists —those people who have devoted their lives to studying outer space." Soldiers that I recognized as being a part of UNIT marched for a stark white corridor and then disappeared into a door on the left.

"UNIT! United Nations Intelligence Task force—good people."

*Maybe if I don't say anything, Mickey will just keep his mouth shut . . .*

"You've worked with them before. I know you have! Yeah, don't think I sat on my backside for twelve months, Doctor. I read up on you. You look deep enough on the Internet . . . and in the history books, and there's his name. Followed by a list of the dead."

*Mickey, stupid, stupid Mickey, why can't you just do as I mentally order you to do?*

The Doctor smiled mockingly, almost looking like he was going to give Mickey a pat on the head. "That's nice. Good boy, Ricky."

"Since you know them, why aren't you helpin' them?" Mickey asked, furrowing his eyebrows.

I let out a strangled groan/sigh thing. "Mickey, it's been a long time, a really long time since he last worked with them. He's changed since then, a lot. So much that they wouldn't recognize him and would probably shoot him since government organizations are paranoid like that."

"Besides, the world's on a knife-edge. There are aliens out there and fake aliens," The Doctor added, easily maneuvering around the console to tap several buttons. I managed to flip exactly three switches and an eggbeater before The Doctor nudged me out of the way with his hip. "We want to keep this alien out of the mix. I'm going undercover . . . and eh, better keep the TARDIS out of sight." He hopped to the TARDIS doors. "Ricky! You've got a car—you can do some driving."

Mickey gawked at him incredulously. "Where to?!"

"The roads are clearing. Let's go and have a look at that spaceship," The Doctor chirped, flinging the doors opens.

Helicopters whirled overhead. A spotlight immediately trained itself on The Doctor and me.

One of the soldiers had a megaphone. "Do not move! Step away from the box!"

Shielding my eyes with a hand, I squinted out at the people surrounding us. Dozens of police cars, all with sirens continuously blaring, surrounded us, along with soldiers who had their guns pointed at us. I wasn't exactly afraid, nervous was more like it, but I did shuffle behind The Doctor when he motioned for me to. I watched Mickey escape out the corner of my eye. I wanted to call him a coward, but could I blame him? There were soldiers with weapons ready to shoot us if we tried to escape! Any normal person would be freaking out.

Just then, both Jackie and Ashley dashed out of Powell Estate. They were screaming for us (Okay, just for me) to be let go and were trying to get to us, but the soldiers restrained them.

Another searchlight shined right into my eyes. I squinted even more and wrinkled my nose in annoyance. Honestly, did they have to be so rude about everything? Where were we going to run, anyway? Not counting the blue box behind us that could go anywhere in space and time, of course.

"Raise your hands above your head! You are under arrest!" The man with the megaphone, whom I
still couldn't see, ordered.

As we did as we were told, I couldn't help but giggle. "I'm getting arrested! My friends back in my dimension would love this! None of them ever thought I'd go to jail. Guess who gets the last laugh now?"

The Doctor had a much larger grin on his face than I did, and it was filled with just as much glee, if not more. "Take me to your leader!"

The Doctor and I were herded into a fancy black car that drove off as soon as the doors closed. Police cars escorted us through the streets. In the back seat of the car, I stretched out on my back next to The Doctor, using his lap as a pillow. He was idly toying with my hair.

"You do know we're not gettin' arrested, right?" The Doctor asked. He tickled my nose with a lock of my hair.

Swatting his hand away in mock irritation, I hummed, "Mmhm, pity though. Always wondered what it was like to get arrested."

He chuckled. "Weirdo. Why would ya want to know what it's like to get arrested?"

I scoffed, "Like you can talk! With all your talk of 'Take me to your leader'! Besides, you've been arrested loads 'a times. On different planets!"

"Not on purpose! And I didn't enjoy it!" he objected, giving my hair a moderate tug.

I swatted at his hand again. "I call bullshit on both fronts, Mister Time Lord."

The Doctor didn't answer, but he did wink. I managed to jab him in side right as the car came to a stop. Before he could counter, I righted myself and threw the door open, clambering out of the car —and right in between a mob of camera crews, flashing lights, and too many damn voices all shouting at once. I grimaced. Immediately, I slouched and stuffed my hands into my trusty hoodie, trudging into 10 Downing Street, glowering the entire way.

The Doctor, however, took his time, waving and grinning like a loon. When he finally skipped inside, I sent him a face melting glare. He sent me a wink that normally would've made my cheeks turn pink and my stomach to twist pleasantly, but I was too annoyed to be horny. Wow, never thought that'd happen. Oh, quick! Pay attention to the freaky MI5 lady!

Too late, whatever she had been trying to tell me faded out into background noise. I observed my surroundings in the meantime. Harriet Jones was sneaking around the room, being exceptionally successful for the most part.

Indra, the secretary, entered the room and called out, "Ladies and Gentlemen, could we convene? Quick as we can, please. It's this way on the right and can I remind you, ID cards are to be worn at all times." He dangled his own ID for everyone to see.

I had been planning on hanging back and chilling against the wall until the action started, but The Doctor laced his fingers with mine and tugged me along despite my quiet protests.

Indra frowned when he handed over an ID to The Doctor. "Here's your ID card. I'm sorry, your companion doesn't have clearance."
The Doctor slipped the card around his neck, plainly stating, "I don't go anywhere without her."

"You're the Code Nine, not her," Indra said calmly. "I'm sorry, Doctor . . . It is The Doctor, isn't it? She'll have to stay outside."

The Doctor once again laced his fingers with mine. "She's staying with me," he repeated firmly.

Indra sighed, but kept his composed demeanor. "Look, even I don't have clearance to go in there. I can't let her in and that's a fact."

I stepped in before The Doctor could make an even bigger scene. "Doctor, I'll be fine, go on ahead." I tugged him down to my level and whispered in his ear, "Watch out, the Prime Minister's an alien and he's got the ID card's rigged with electricity. He plans to kill all the experts, hopefully you can stop him." Releasing him, I nodded toward the conference room. "Be careful."

"You, too," he murmured and disappeared into the room.

Harriet walked over and took my arm. "It's all right. I'll look after her. Let me be of some use." She looked at me over her shoulder. "Walk with me. Just keep walking . . ." We walked past a few guards, none of which even twitched when we walked by. "That's right . . . don't look round! Harriet Jones, MP Flydale North." She held up her ID for me to inspect.

We stopped under the stairs. Harriet was keeping her cool, but it was obvious how nervous she was by how paranoid she was being.

"This friend of yours . . . He's an expert, is that right? He knows about aliens?" Harriet asked cautiously.

Ready to comfort her (No matter how awkward I felt), I answered with a question, "Why do you wanna know?"

Harriet broke down in tears. I tried my best to comfort her and while it wasn't a very good effort, Harriet seemed to appreciate it because she gave me a shaky smile before wiping away her tears and leading me to the Cabinet Room. The first thing I saw was the body suit of Oliver.

"They turned the body into a suit! A disguise for the thing inside!" Harriet sobbed, burying her face in her hands.

I started to panic. *God, why do I always end up with the crying people? Why can't The Doctor be in this kind of situation every once in a while?* "It's all right! I believe you! There's an alien around here, and it can use people's skin as a disguise! I believe you, but please, please stop crying . . ." I trailed off and shuffled over to the cupboard I remembered the other skin suit being hidden in.

Taking a deep breath, I opened the door. Despite being prepared, I still jumped, skin crawling, when the empty body of a man fell out.

Oh God, I thought, swallowing the bile that had risen into my throat. *That's so much more disgusting than it is on TV.*

Harriet leaned closer to examine the Prime Minister's body. I moved closer to the door. My hand reached into my left back pocket and discretely drew out my sonic screwdriver. I didn't have my bag today, but I had made sure I had this stowed away. Not that I knew many settings; though, I would need only the newest one I learned for this situation.

Harriet inhaled sharply. "Oh, my God! Is that . . . ?!"
An irritated Indra charged in. Scowling, he barked, "Harriet, for God's sake! This has gone beyond a joke—you cannot just wander . . ." The sight of the body on the floor cut him off. "Oh, my God. That's the Prime Minister!"

I reached forward and jerked him behind me. I could save him. I wouldn't let that bitch Margaret kill him if I could save him.

"Oh~"

A large woman in a blue suit (Why hadn't I recognized her earlier?) entered.

Nudging Harriet and Indra behind me, I ordered hurriedly. "Stay behind me. Do exactly as I say, when I say it. If you don't, you'll die. Sorry, but you have to trust me."

Both of them, though terrified out of their minds, nodded erratically. All the color had drained from Harriet's face and Indra was sweating more than I believed medically safe. I gritted my teeth and faced Margaret again. Focus, Dahlia! They're depending on you to get them out of this alive! You're not allowed to be frightened. Put on your big girl panties and get to work.

"Has someone been naughty?" Margaret mocked, closing the door behind her with an echoing click.

"That's impossible. He left this afternoon. The Prime Minister left Downing Street, he was driven away!" How Indra managed not to stumble over his words, I'll never know.

The woman smiled maliciously. "And who told you that? Hm?" She took a step closer to us.

My grip on the sonic tightened.

Her voice dripped with bitter sweet poison as she spoke: "Me." She reached up and slowly unzipped her forehead. Margaret slithered out of the skin suit, revealing the Slitheen hiding inside. She took another menacing footstep towards us.

Steadying myself with a deep gulp of air, I raised the sonic and activated it.
A high-pitched whirring came from the sonic, but it gradually increased in pitch until it only sounded like a gnat to us humans. Margaret, however, slowly contorted in pain. Soon she was screeching and clutching at her head with her giant, green paws. I snapped into action, grabbing Harriet and Indra's wrists in each on my hands. I rushed for the door and only paused for long enough to kick it in. The wood crunched and snapped under the force of my kick. The hinges shrieked. I gave it another good smack. The door ripped open, almost snapping off its hinges, and I dashed through, keeping my companions' wrists in my grip so they wouldn't fall behind. The sonic was still in my hand, no doubt leaving indentions on Indra's skin.

The lights were out. That was probably The Doctor; hopefully he managed to do something about the specialists.

I felt my newfound luggage start to drag. Of course, they would start to get tired when we were running for our lives. That was just my luck. "Come on! You guys have to keep going! I know this sucks ass but—"

Harriet skidded to a halt, nearly making me trip and take Indra with me. Instead, he rammed straight into my back, somehow managing to hit me right in the kidney. I winced, choking off the cry of pain I wanted so badly to release.

"Harriet . . ." I said, rounding on her.

She was still terrified, but there was determination and courage in her eyes that wasn't there before. "No, wait! They're still in there! The emergency protocols! We need them!"

I groaned but followed her when she ran back the way we came. Indra seemed about ready to faint, so I repossessed his wrist and drug him along again. How did The Doctor do this all day?

We were nearly back to the original room when Margaret appeared. Crossing the hall, we dove into a random room. I slammed the door shut, but it never stood a chance against the Slitheen, who merely smashed her way through. I shoved Harriet and Indra through another door and locked it behind me. Knowing it wouldn't last, I joined Harriet at the next door. She was attempting to kick it open, but she didn't seem to have the leg strength. Without meaning to, I rudely pushed her out of my way. Rearing my leg back, I was ready to smash the flimsy wooden structure to pieces when the elevator behind us ding-ed.

I didn't turn around, I knew who it was.

"Hello," The Doctor greeted cheerfully.

I rolled my eyes, mentally slapping him for being so gleeful in the face of death.

"Dahlia, what're you doing?" he asked. I could practically see the puzzled look on his face.

"This," I stated, slamming my foot into the door. The lock crunched against the wood, and the door swung open, bouncing off the opposite wall from the force.

The Doctor didn't miss a beat. "That was rather dramatic . . ." He used the sonic on the elevator doors, causing them to close.

I scoffed, "Glad I have your approval, now everybody in!"
Once inside, I didn't pause before hiding behind the heavy curtains, dragging a quivering Indra behind me. That desk/cupboard hybrid was too flimsy to be a good hiding spot. Harriet took her place behind the Chinese silk screen. Not too long after we hid, Margaret's voice floated in hearing range, though muffled by the door.

"Oh, such fun! Little human children . . ." she cooed sickly sweet. "Where are you? Sweet little humeeykins . . . Come to me . . . Let me kiss you better . . ."

Indra was holding in his sobs. His teeth chewed on his lip so harshly I thought he would bite right through it. Taking his hand in mine, I gave it a squeeze. Indra looked at me, blinking away the tears leaking down his cheeks. I smiled reassuringly and mouthed 'It'll be okay'. He sucked in a quick breath andmouthed back 'How do you know?'

Smirking for half a second, I whispered, "Just trust me."

He stared at me with apprehension. Then he nodded once sharply.

". . . Kiss you with my big, green lips," Margaret said in a sing-song voice, ending her call with a loud slurp. She was inside the room now.

We all heard her loud greeting: "My brothers."

A shudder ran down my spine. Doctor, you better not be late. I swear to whatever God that exists, if you're late, I will haunt you until you can't regenerate.

"Happy hunting?" That was Joseph Green, I think. His voice was the same weird trill as Margaret's. I gagged.

"It's wonderful. The more you prolong it, the more they stink."

"Sweat . . . and fear." And there was the third. General Asquith—was that the body he was using? In reality, I didn't give a damn, but thinking about these random bits of knowledge that could easily escape my mind kept the fear at bay with irritation. If that made any sense.

"I can smell an old girl . . . stale bird . . . brittle bones." Which one was that? I knew what order they appeared in, but couldn't really tell the difference unless they were in their skins.

"And ripe youngsters, all hormones and adrenaline. Fresh enough to bend before they snap," Margaret giggled nastily.

I held my breath and tightened my grip on Indra's hand. Margaret swept the curtain back on her last word, displaying Indra and me. Indra choked on air and spit. In an odd moment of protectiveness, I stepped in front of Indra, glaring at Margaret like she would burn if I stared at her with enough hatred.

Harriet leaped from where she was hidden, flailing her arms out and screaming, "No! Take me first! Take me!"

Everyone's eyes snapped to her. Even I spared her a fleeting glance before shifting my glare back to the Slitheen. Her distraction was a well-timed and well-volumed one, though, because The Doctor crashed through the door seconds later, wielding a fire extinguisher. Balancing his weapon of choice on a couch arm, he sprayed the enemy aliens with some sort of foam.

"Out! With me!" The Doctor ordered.
Taking hold of the curtains, I used as much force as I could muster one handedly to rip them down. Indra, coming to his senses, released my hand and helped me. Together we tore the curtains from their spot and shoved them over Margaret's head. I reclaimed Indra's hand and pulled him behind The Doctor.

The Doctor frowned at Harriet, who was at his other side. Firing the extinguisher again, he asked rudely, "Who the hell are you?"

Harriet didn't even hesitate. "Harriet Jones—MP for Flydale North." I was only slightly disappointed that she didn't pull out her ID.

He sprayed the closest Slitheen again. "Nice to meet you."

Harriet grinned. "Likewise."

The Doctor sprayed the extinguisher one last time, causing the Slitheen to shriek in agony. I had already shoved Harriet and Indra out of the room. The Doctor's heavy boots thundered after us. I had no idea where we were going. This place reminded me of the TARDIS. Unless you knew it like the back of your hand or had someone to help you, you were as good as lost.

"We need to get to the cabinet rooms!" The Doctor shouted.

Harriet quickly answered, "The Emergency Protocols are in there! They give instructions on aliens! How the hell is she running in heels? I wondered. If I tried that, I would end up flat on my face with my ass sticking in the air.

The Doctor sped up to lead the group. "Harriet Jones—I like you."

"I like you too." Harriet sounded as if we were all having a pleasant conversation at lunch, not running for our lives from aliens bent on killing us.

Indra made a strangled sound in the back on his throat. I guess he realized how ridiculous those two sounded.

The Doctor looked over his shoulder. "Oh . . . thought you fainted. Who're you?"

"I-I-Indra, sir," Indra stuttered loudly.

"Are you scared, Indra?"

"Yes-yes sir."

"Good, because you should be!" The Doctor replied cheerily.

Just for that, I was definitely gonna smack him.

The Doctor stopped in front of a seemingly random door. Using his sonic, he swiftly unlocked the door. Unfortunately, it wasn't quick enough because he didn't have enough time to close the door once we were all inside. Thinking quickly, The Doctor snatched up a bottle of brandy, brandishing the sonic at it like a weapon of mass destruction. Harriet held a bright red suitcase—the security protocols—protectively to her chest. I stood on The Doctor's other side, keeping Indra, who had decided to stop sobbing in favor of muttering to himself about how we were all going to die, behind me.

"One more move and my sonic device will triplicate the flammability of this alcohol. Whoof! We
all go up. So back off," The Doctor bluffed. His tone was deadly, causing the Slitheen to pause in their approach. "Right then. Question time," he started with the same lethal but cheery voice. He dropped the brandy down half a foot and asked, "Who exactly are the Slitheen?"

"They're aliens," Harriet said helpfully-but-not-really.

"Yes, I got that, thanks." The Doctor replied sarcastically, looking at her briefly before going back to the Slitheen.

"Who are you, if not human?" Joseph Green asked inquisitively. At least, I think it was him.

Harriet frowned. "Who's not human?"

Sighing, I cut in, "The Doctor's not human."

Harriet gave me an incredulous look, asking, "He's not human?"

The Doctor looked back. "Can I have a bit of hush?" he snapped, irritated at not being included in the conversation.

"Sorry," Harriet apologized. She seemed to really mean it, too.

I mentally snorted. Like she would let it go that easily.

The Doctor turned back to the Slitheen. "So—what's the plan?"

And here it is . . . "But he's got a Northern accent." Harriet was frowning again.

I decided to step in, before The Doctor decided to put his bluff to the test just to make her be quiet while he was being all dramatic. "Harriet, it's best if we give The Doctor his hush now," I chastised sensitively.

Her cheeks turned a light pink color, and her eyes were downcast. "Sorry."

The Doctor gave me a thankful look.

Then, smiling, I added, "And lots of planets have a north."

The Doctor's thankful look turned nasty. I giggled but stayed quiet. He held up the brandy again, wagging it threateningly as he snapped at the Slitheen. "Come on! You've got a spaceship hidden in the North Sea transmitting a signal. You've murdered your way to the top of government. What for? Invasion?"

"Why would we invade this godforsaken rock?" Affronted, the third Slitheen barked (Was he the general?).

"Then something's brought the Slitheen race here. What is it?" The Doctor insisted.

"The Slitheen race?" was snarled in rage. "Slitheen is not our species. Slitheen is our surname. Jocrassa Fel Fotch Pasameer-Day-Slitheen at your service," he sneered.

The Doctor took a moment to smile, quietly asking, "So, you're family?"

"A family business."

"Then you're out to make a profit. How can you do that on a 'godforsaken rock'?"
One of the Slitheen spoke up: "Ahhh . . . excuse me. Your device will do what? Triplicate the flammability . . ?"

The Doctor responded easily, "That's what I said."

The one who spoke accused, "You're making it up!"

"Ah, well! Nice try. Harriet, have a drink. I think you're gonna need it." The Doctor shrugged, offering Harriet the alcohol.

The woman smiled politely. "You pass it to the left first."

I wondered if this was a good time to ask what that was all about. I was always too lazy to look it up before. Somehow, though, I highly doubted my question would be appreciated. At least by The Doctor, anyway.

"Sorry," he said, passing the decanter to Indra.

"Thanks," the terrified man squeaked, clutching the bottle in his free hand before taking a large swig.

"Now we can end this hunt . . . with a slaughter." The Slitheen who spoke raised his claws.

"Shouldn't we run?" Indra questioned fearfully.

I released his hand to pat him on the shoulder. "Now, now, Indra, don't be so hasty. Whatever they want to do to us can't be half as bad as more running. Perhaps we should hear him out." I couldn't have sounded sincerer if I tried.

The man looked at me like I was insane. Grinning, I glanced at The Doctor, waiting for him to make a move.

He was barely keeping his own grin from showing. When he spoke, he sounded like a mixture of an excited child and a lecturing professor: "Fascinating history, Downing Street. Two thousand years ago, this was marsh land. 1730, it was occupied by a Mr. Chicken. He was a nice man. 1796, this was the Cabinet Room. If the cabinet's in session and in danger, these are about the four safest walls in the whole of Great Britain." He flipped open a grey cover and pressed the switch that had been hidden earlier. "End of lesson."

Metal ground against wood as thick steel shutters closed off every entrance to the Cabinet Room.

The Doctor faced us, grinning in pride as his work. "Installed in 1991. Three inches of steel lining every single wall. They'll never get in."

Raising an eyebrow, I asked the question that was on the other two humans' minds, "How do we get out?" I didn't fake worry or curiosity. Mentally shuddering, I realized what I sounded like—a teacher asking one of her students why they left a simple question blank.

The Doctor's grin didn't falter. "Ah."

I could practically hear the 'I didn't think about that' that went unsaid.

While I watched The Doctor drag the empty flesh suit that used to be the Prime Minister back into its closet, two thoughts occurred to me: Indra could've been in there, too, and what about the others?
"Doctor . . . what," I cleared my throat, "what about the others?"

He finished with the Prime Minister and gave me a grim look over his shoulder. I feared for the worst. Then he smiled kindly. "Saved all but one. Managed to cut the electricity off before the circuit was filled, only knocked 'em out."

I let out a sigh of relief, but seized up a second later. "Where are they? Are they still in the other room?"

He grinned and shook his head. "Nah. Went back to search for the extinguisher and saw they weren't there. Window was broken. They even took the body of the dead one."

I collapsed in a chair, smiling stupidly. Only one had died. I had made a difference this time . . .

The Doctor shoved out of his kneeling position and stood. Swaggering away from the closet, he asked, "Right, what have we got? Any terminals? Anything?"

Since I was lost in thought, Harriet took over the line I was supposed to say. "No, no one ever saw the point of updating. What I don't get, is when they killed the Prime Minister, why didn't they use him as a disguise?"

Using his sonic on the barred windows, The Doctor absentmindedly replied, "He's too slim—they're big old beasts, they need to fit inside big humans."

Harriet frowned in confusion. "But the Slitheen are about eight feet, how do they squeeze inside?"

"That's the device around their necks—compression field—literally shrinks them down a bit. That's why there's all that gas, it's a big exchange."

I came out of my fog. "Ya know, most of the female population would kill for one of those . . . not that I would, but still, it'd almost be worth it."

"Excuse me, people are dead. This is not the time for making jokes," Harriet snapped, sending me an appalled glare.

I shrugged off her comment. "When you run around with The Doctor, you get used to that kind of humor. It's like the police and morticians—regular people think their jokes are insulting to the dead, but really, it's just a mechanism to cope with seeing death everywhere. So, really, it's the perfect time to be making jokes."

"Well, that's a strange friendship."

The Doctor suddenly paused in his work. "Harriet Jones—I've heard that name before—Harriet Jones. You're not famous for anythin', are you?"

With a laugh of self-deprecation, Harriet muttered, "Hardly!"

"Rings a bell, Harriet Jones . . ."

I smirked at The Doctor's confusion and snickered. He gave me the stink eye, knowing I knew what he was trying to remember but refusing to tell him.

"Lifelong back bencher I'm afraid, and a fat lot of use I'm being now. The protocols are redundant. They list the people who can help, and they've all escaped," Harriet huffed tiredly.

Nudging out a chair for Indra with a foot, I vaguely asked, "Wouldn't it have, like, nuclear launch
"codes in there? Ya know? In case of an emergency?"

"There's nothing like that in here. Nuclear strikes do need a release code, yes, but it's kept secret by the United Nations," Harriet replied, frowning.

The Doctor froze and whirled around, coming to stand beside Harriet. He leaned on a chair. "Say that again."

"What, about the codes?" Harriet questioned, puzzled.

"Anything. All of it." Anyone could see the glimmer of an idea in his eyes.

Hesitating for only a few seconds to think, Harriet said, "Um, well . . . the British Isles can't gain access to atomic weapons without a special resolution from the UN."

"Like that would stop any government," I scoffed.

"Exactly, given our past record—and I voted against that, thank you very much. The codes have been taken out of the governments hands and given to the UN. Is it important?"

"Everything's important." The Doctor stared into space absently.

"If we only knew what the Slitheen wanted. Listen to me, I'm saying 'Slitheen' as if it's normal," Indra's voice cracked, but he didn't cry. I gave him a few brownie points.

I inspected my nails. I needed a nail file. "So . . . what do they want? They don't want to invade, and it's some sort of business that they need to murder their way into the government for. How many occupations could that be?"

"They want to use something," The Doctor thought aloud. He started to pace. "Something here on Earth . . . some kind of asset."


The Doctor beamed at her. "You're very good at this."

The woman seemed overjoyed at his compliment. "Thank you."

He pursed his lips in thought and glared at the wall. "Harriet Jones—why do I know that name?"

Fortunately, my phone rang (Digimon theme song, bitches!) before The Doctor could bust a blood vessel trying to remember. I removed it from my pocket, grumbling, "Why is it that people always want to talk at the most inappropriate times?"

Harriet gaped at me. "But we're sealed of—how did you get a signal?" she asked incredulously.

I used the phone to point at The Doctor. "He did some techno jiggery-pokery to it. Super phone," I explained, flipping open my cell and examining exactly what had been sent to me.

"Then we can phone for help! You must have contacts!" Indra pleaded to The Doctor.

The Doctor snorted, "All in the hospital, yeah."

"It's Mickey," I called out.

He scowled. "Oh, tell your friend's stupid boyfriend we're busy."
"You shouldn't call him stupid," I sing-songed. I held my phone up for him to see the picture of a Slitheen getting electrocuted in Jackie's kitchen. The phone rang again, this time signaling an incoming call. I answered it with only slight irritation. "They're all right? No, Mickey, I don't want to talk to them, just tell me if they're all right."


"Is that Ricky? Don't talk, just shut up and go to your computer," The Doctor ordered cantankerously. "Mickey the Idiot, I might just choke before I finish this sentence, but, eh . . . I need you."

I snickered.

While Mickey did as he was told, The Doctor connected my phone to a speaker he had found. He sat it in the middle of the table and waited; whatever Mickey tried to say was blocked out by static.

"Say it again."

"It's asking for the password," Mickey repeated.

Harriet poured each of us a glass of brandy. Indra downed his in one go and motioned for another. Raising an eyebrow, Harriet granted his request.

The Doctor responded easily, like knowing top secret government passwords was something everyone knew, "Buffalo—two Fs, one L."

Jackie asked some offhand question about the website. Mickey explained simply: "All the secret information known to mankind. See, they've known about aliens for years, they just kept us in the dark."

"Mickey, you were born in the dark!" The Doctor snapped.

"Leave him alone!" Ashley barked back, obviously having overhead The Doctor's comment.

"Thank you." I could hear the delight in Mickey's voice. "Password again."

"Just repeat it, every time." Wow, not big on security, are they? "Big Ben—why did the Slitheen hit Big Ben?"

Harriet handed him his glass of alcohol. "You said to gather the experts . . . to kill them."

Shaking his head, The Doctor said, "That lot would've gathered for a weather balloon, you don't need to crash land in the middle of London." He looked at me. "Dahlia, how much can you tell us?"

"How 'bout a question instead?" I smiled. "If the Slitheen were hiding, why would they put the entire planet on red alert?"

"Oh, listen to her," Jackie scoffed over the phone.

I narrowed my eyes at the phone. Jackie, I swear to God . . .

"Well, I've got a question, if you don't mind. Because since that man walked into our lives, I have been attacked in the streets. I have had creatures from the pits of hell in my own living room, and my daughter disappeared off the face of the Earth," Jackie snarled.
"I told you not to call me that," I muttered. "And I told you what happened."

"I'll call you what I want!" she snapped. "And I'm talking to him! 'Cause I've seen this life of yours, Doctor. And maybe you get off on it. And maybe you think it's all clever and smart, but you tell me. Just answer me this . . . is my daughter safe?"

The Doctor's face darkened. He looked down and glowered at the table. That was one question I knew he'd never be able to answer. Both of us knew the truth, that I was likely to die today or tomorrow as long as I kept running with him, but she had no right, no right to judge until she actually took time to get to know him.

Jackie was quick to attack in the moment of silence. "So, tell me Doctor. Is she safe? Will she always be safe? Can you promise me that?"

I grimaced at the phone. "Jackie, for once in your life, be quiet."

"Dahlia, I'm asking—"

"I know," I cut her off, "but I'm answering. The answer is no. No, he cannot promise that I'll always be safe. In fact, the only thing he can promise is that each and every day I'm likely to die. You wanted the truth, Jackie—there it is. What're you gonna do about it? I don't take orders from you. You might think of yourself as my mother, but you're not. Hell, even if she told me to stay away from The Doctor, I wouldn't. I chose to travel with him, and the only way I'll stop is if he kicks me out of the TARDIS. The only consolation I can offer you and Ashley is that he'll try his damnedest to keep me safe. And if you actually knew him, you'd know I'm a hell of a lot safer with him than anywhere else in the universe." My hard gaze was drawn up to The Doctor. He was frozen in place, eyes wide and jaw slack, though not gaping openly. He obviously hadn't expected me to stand up to him.

I mentally snorted. Of course, he hadn't, who would dare stand up to Jackie Tyler?

"We're in," Mickey said, breaking through the tension that had gripped the room. Hell, I thought Indra was about to drown in sweat and alcohol.

The Doctor cleared his throat and moved closer to the speaker and spoke clearly, "Right then. On the left, there's a tab—an icon—little concentric circles. Click on that."

A series of incomprehensible beeps on repeat sounded from the phone. "What is it?" Mickey asked, no doubt frowning at the screen of his computer.

"The Slitheen have got a spaceship in the North Sea, and it's transmitting that signal. Now hush, let me work out what it's saying," The Doctor said quickly.

Jackie attempted to ask something but was hushed by Mickey.

"It's some sort of message," I piped up, stealing The Doctor's line.

Indra frowned and leaned forward. "What's it say?" Huh . . . didn't expect him to be curious.

"Don't know. It's on a loop, keeps repeating." A doorbell on Mickey's end of the connection cut him off. "Hush!" The Doctor growled at the phone.

"That's not me," Mickey defended. "Go and see who that is," he told Jackie. He sighed roughly when Jackie attempted to argue. "Well go and tell them that."
The Doctor, however, still had his mind on the signal. "It's beaming out into space. Who's it for?"

Jackie screamed something in the background. Mickey cursed. "They've found us."

"Mickey, I need that signal," The Doctor huffed irritably.

"Nevermind the signal! We need to get out!" That was Ashley. It was the first time I'd heard her speak since our chat in her room. She sounded scared out of mind. I clenched my fists and set my jaw.

Surprisingly, Mickey was the voice of reason in the situation. "We can't. It's by the front door." A buzzing interrupted him. "Oh, my God, it's unmasking! It's gonna kill us!"

"There's got to be some way of stopping them!" Harriet screamed. She glared at The Doctor and wrathfully barked, "You're supposed to be the expert, think of something!"

"I'm trying!" he snapped back.

I shoved out of my chair and stalked closer to the phone. "Mickey, give the phone to the closest person!" I ordered and impatiently waited for him to obey.

"Wha-what now?" Ashley's voice quivered over the connection.

I inhaled deeply. "Do exactly as I say, Ashley. Go to the kitchen and find anything with vinegar. Empty it all into a bowl."

The Doctor narrowed his eyes at me. "What're you doing?" he demanded.

"Saving their lives," I retorted bluntly.

"Aha! Gherkins! Yeah! Pickled onions! Picked eggs!" Ashley sounded off every vinegar related item she found.

The Doctor curled his lip in distaste. He looked up at me. "She kisses that man?"

Deciding to ignore him, I continued to instruct Ashley: "Toss the entire bowl on the Slitheen. Make sure he's in the hallway and not the living room, because there's gonna be one serious mess."

A few seconds later, a resounding bang from the phone signaled that the Slitheen was just a bunch of bits and goo.

We all let out sighs of relief. Harriet gave me a hard look. "How did you know what to do? I thought The Doctor was the expert."

I rolled my eyes and tried not to sound too condescending when I replied. "Just because everyone acknowledges him as the expert, it doesn't mean he knows or can do everything. Besides, it was simple to deduce once I knew which planet they were from."

The Doctor grinned and asked, "Which one?"

Raising an eyebrow, I simply said, "Raxacoricofallapatorius."

"Aha! Knew it!" he cheered.

I smirked, reaching over to pat the hand he had resting on the table. "I'm sure you did, Doctor," I cooed.
He ignored me in order to listen to Mickey. "Listen to this."

Joseph Green's voice sprung from the phone. "Our inspectors have searched the sky above our heads and they have found massive weapons of destruction, capable of being deployed within forty-five seconds."

The Doctor's brow furrowed in confusion. "What?"

Joseph Green continued. "Our technicians can... baffle... the alien probes but not for long. We are facing extinction unless we strike first. The United Kingdom stands directly beneath the belly of the mother ship. I beg the United Nations, pass an emergency resolution. Give us the access codes. A nuclear strike at the heart of the ship is our only chance of survival. Because... from this moment on... it is my solemn duty to inform you... planet Earth is at war." Holy shit, was that what people really sound like when they tell people they're probably going to die? I used that tone all the time; it's a wonder everyone around me isn't permanently in panic mode.

Glaring at the phone with disgust, The Doctor pointed at it and said, "He's making it up. There's no weapons up there, there's no threat. He just invented it."

"Do you think they'll believe him?" Harriet asked fearfully.

Indra spoke up, "Why wouldn't they?"

"Besides, that's human nature. When we're afraid, we lash out at what we think is about the hurt us. Most of the time we rarely even think to ask questions before blowing something up," I added.

Moving toward the door, The Doctor muttered, "That's why the Slitheen went for spectacle. They want the whole world panicking. Dahlia's right. You lot—you get scared, you lash out."

"They release the defense codes..." I trailed off, waiting for The Doctor to finish the thought.

"And the Slitheen go nuclear."

"But why?" Harriet asked desperately.

The Doctor pressed the grey button near the shutters, causing them to open a four-inch window for us to see the Slitheen. "You get the codes, release the missiles— but not into space because there's nothing there. You attack every other country on Earth, they retaliate, fight back. World War Three. Whole planet gets nuked," The Doctor said coldly.

Margaret moved past the other Slitheen to stand in front. "And we can sit through it in our spaceship waiting in the Thames. Not crashed. Just parked. Only two minutes away!"

Harriet seemed to not be able to believe what she was hearing, because she cried, "But you'll destroy the planet, this beautiful place. What for?"

The Doctor answered her question instead of the Slitheen. "Profit. That's what the signal is beaming into space—an advert."

"Sale of the century. We reduce the Earth to molten slag, then sell it. Piece by piece. Radioactive chucks, capable of powering every cut-price star liner and budget cargo ship. There's a recession out there, Doctor. People are buying cheap. This rock becomes raw fuel," Margaret replied. Her smug smile said the rest.

"At the cost of 5 billion lives." The calm Doctor was back. Too bad the Slitheen didn't know how
much trouble they really were in.

"Bargain!" Margaret giggled arrogantly.

"Then I give you a choice—leave this planet or I'll stop you," he said simply.

The Slitheen laughed gutturally. A shudder ran up my spine. I wasn't sure if it was from the Slitheen's laughter or from my knowledge of The Oncoming Storm and his warning signs.

Margaret's snickering quieted just enough for her to speak. "What? You? Trapped in your box?"

With a face of impassive calm, The Doctor quietly confirmed: "Yes. Me." Two words that were so insignificant, so calmly spoken. They shouldn't have meant anything, but they did. Those two words were the perfect promise.

He pressed the grey button again and the doors slowly closed.

Margaret's smirk slipped from her face. I could see her assurance fade and fear take its place. The Slitheen had mocked the Devil, and there would be Hell to pay.

The reporter from the television Mickey had set the phone on gave his report coolly: "It's midnight here in New York. The United Nations has gathered. England has provided them with absolute proof that the massive weapons of mass destruction do exist. The Security Council will be making a resolution in a matter of minutes. And once the codes are released, humanity's first interplanetary war begins."

"All right, Doctor. I'm not saying I trust you, but there must be something you can do," Jackie said anxiously.

Harriet absentmindedly remarked, "If we could ferment the porch, we could make acetic acid."

I sighed. "No point in trying any of the emergency numbers—they're all on voicemail."

Leaning back and closing my eye, I thought. *Here it comes. Better get ready . . . hopefully Indra won't start crying again.*

"Voicemail dooms us all," Harriet muttered mournfully.

Indra's voice was rough. "If we could just get out of here . . ."

"There's a way out." The Doctor was standing away from the rest of us, leaning against a wall with his arms crossed over his chest as he thought. I could picture that stance perfectly. I didn't need to open my eyes to see it.

"What?" Indra choked out.

"There's always been a way out."

I could practically picture the scandalized look on Indra's face. "Then why don't we use it?"

The Doctor's heavy boots thumped on the floor as he moved over to the table. He spoke into the phone and directly to Jackie. "Because I can't guarantee Dahlia will be safe."

Jackie didn't hesitate to snub the idea. "Don't you dare! Whatever it is, don't you dare!"

"That's the thing, if I don't dare, everyone dies," he stated back matter-of-factly.
"Doctor, quit drawing this out for drama's sake and do it already," I admonished from my seat. I didn't bother opening my eyes to watch his reaction. I felt his stare on me. I still didn't look at him.

"Dahlia," he urged quietly, and I knew what he needed.

Blinking until my vision was clear, I met The Doctor's stare and my stomach quivered. It wasn't fair. Why did he get the power to show so many emotions with one look? Why couldn't I do that? So much warmth and trust bleeding with a need for reassurance that he was doing the right thing; worry melding into his sense of duty to save as many people as possible, even at the cost of those he valued most.

"Yes, Doctor, I know what you're going to do and yes, I trust you. You really shouldn't have to ask at this point, but oh well." I shrugged as if trying to get rid of his concern, but he knew better.

"Please, Doctor. Please! She's just like a daughter to me. She's just a kid."

The Doctor spoke to Jackie, but kept his gaze on me. "Do you think I don't know that? Because this is my life, Jackie, it's not fun, it's not smart. It's just standing up and making a decision because nobody else will."

I hummed The Girl from Impanema. "Then what're you waiting for, Doctor?"

"Dahlia . . . oh, Dahlia Tombew, you don't understand . . ." My gut twisted again and my breath hitched in my throat. He wasn't supposed to say that. That wasn't the line. His eyes were pleading with me to understand what he was trying to convey, but I couldn't. "I could save the world but lose you."

Harriet decided to ruin our moment (if that's what it could be called). "Except it's not your decision, Doctor. It's mine." She walked closer to the table, head held high and standing tall. She was a statue of stoic responsibility.

"And who the hell are you?" Jackie demanded angrily.

"Harriet Jones, MP for Flydale North. The only elected representative in this room, chosen by the people, for the people, and on behalf of the people I command you. Do it." Her hand twitched when she introduced herself, like she was itching to reach for her ID.

The Doctor grinned at me and reached for the briefcase that held the emergency protocols.

"Doctor! Wait!"

He paused at Ashley's desperate tone. We all waited for her to speak.

She cleared her throat and nervously started, "Dahlia, do you . . . do you trust him? I-I'm not gonna argue like my mum, but I . . . I just need to know that . . ."

A small smile graced my lips. Good ole Ashley, she was less like her mom than I thought she was.

"I trust him with my life and more, Ashley." My reply was quiet, but it carried throughout the room easily.

I was paying so much attention to Ashley that I almost missed the smile The Doctor gave me. My cheeks heated up, and I kept my eyes on the smooth tabletop.

Ashley coughed. "All right then. Well, Doctor, how do you lot get out?"
"We don't. We stay here," he said, shuffling through the protocols. "Use the buffalo password, it overrides everything."

I shoved myself out of my chair and moved toward the supply closet. Jerking the door open, I pointed at both Indra and Harriet. "You two, help me clear all this stuff out. We'll ride out the explosion in here," I ordered. "Doctor, just keep doing what you're doing."

He snorted at my order but didn't say anything against it.

Once the closet was empty, I examined it. Yep, big enough for four people, but just barely.

"Mickey the Idiot. The world is in your hands. Fire," The Doctor said calmly.

A beeping came from the phone; there was a steady crescendo until it was almost the only thing we could hear. "It's on radar. Counter defense 556."

"Stop them intercepting it."

"I'm doing it now."

"Good boy."

"556 neutralized," Mickey stated evenly.

Snatching the phone from the speaker, The Doctor rushed into the closet behind us. I was squeezed in-between The Doctor and Indra, with Harriet on Indra's other side. We all held hands. An alarm started screaming soon after.

"Nice knowing all of you," Harriet choked out.

Should I brace myself? This is going to be like a car wreck, isn't it? I heard that you're supposed to relax during a car wreck since that helps your bones not break as easily, but I'm not sure if that's true or not—The missile hit, cutting off my terrified thoughts. I thought I tensed up in the end, but I wasn't really sure.

My eyes screwed shut, and I clenched both Indra and The Doctor's hands. A scream built up in my throat but I shoved it down, refusing to give in. Someone to my left screamed. It might've been Harriet, but it was probably Indra.

I smelt the fire and ash seconds after the explosion. Suddenly, I was back on Gallifrey; the heat of the flames licking at my skin as I regenerated... No! No-no-no-no, I was at 10 Downing Street with The Doctor, Harriet, and Indra, waiting out a missile strike in a closet. I was not on Gallifrey. I was never on Gallifrey. Back in the closet, my body was tossed every which way along with the others. I curled in on myself and desperately prayed for this to end before The Doctor found out what was wrong.

"Dahlia?" The Doctor was gently shaking me.

I opened my eyes to see him kneeling in front of me. Harriet and Indra were gone. They had probably left through the open door. Struggling to my feet, I raced outside, away from the fire and ash and smell of singed hair.

I collapsed a few feet away from where Harriet and Indra were standing. Harriet was talking to a sergeant. "Harriet Jones. MP, Flydale North. I want you to contact UN immediately, tell the ambassadors the crisis is over and they can step down. Go on, tell the news!" She sighed.
"Someone's got a hell of a job sorting this lot out. Oh, Lord! We haven't even got a Prime Minister!"

Why was my vision going black?

The Doctor stopped behind me, and I could tell he was grinning from the tone of his voice. "Well, maybe you should have a go."

Harriet laughed. "Me? I'm only a back bencher."

Oh . . . I wasn't breathing, that was why. Taking a huge gulp of air, I gasped out, "I'd vote for ya, you know . . . if I was a British citizen, which I'm not. I think. I don't know if I ever got that sorted out."

Harriet only smiled. "Now, don't be silly. Look, I'd better go see if I can help." Climbing over the rubble, she waved an arm above her head. "Hang on!" she shouted. "The Earth is safe! Sergeant!"

Indra stumbled after her, looking like all he wanted to do was collapse in bed with a nice cup of tea.

The Doctor grinned down at me proudly proclaimed, "I thought I knew the name. Harriet Jones—future Prime Minister, elected for three successive terms . . . the architect of Britain's Golden Age."

I groaned. "Well, congratu-fucking-lations, you remembered something for once."

He frowned. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Let's just get back to the TARDIS. This shit-storm requires me consuming multiple pints of Ben & Jerry's while watching Firefly until I pass out," I grumbled, standing and brushing debris and dirt off my pants and shirt.

The Doctor lightly gripped my shoulder. "Dahlia, are you sure you're okay?" His eyes were wide with so much concern I almost broke. Almost. But I didn't. The Doctor didn't need me to dump my problems on his consciousness. No, I would just deal with those when I was alone. Right now, I just wanted to get back the TARDIS and away from where the missile landed. I would feel better then.

"I just have a headache, Doctor. It's nothing," I said lowly. "Can we just get back to the TARDIS?"

For a while he just stared at me, searching my eyes for any signs of lying. Finally, he released my shoulder and backed away. He didn't look satisfied, but he wouldn't push it. Reaching out his hand, The Doctor intertwined his fingers with mine and, smiling hugely, led me to where the TARDIS was parked.

When we entered the Tyler flat, Ashley immediately swept me into a bone crushing hug and Jackie soon after her. Ashley pulled me away just as I was about to be smothered, though, so it was all good. We sat on the couch to watch Harriet's speech, but we didn't pay it a bit of attention. Instead, Ashley clutched my hands in hers and told me that she believed me about everything—me being kidnapped from another dimension to save this one, The Doctor being an alien, my traveling with him—and while she didn't really care for it, she just wanted me to be safe.

Smiling kindly, I reversed our hands so I could squeeze hers comfortably. "Ashley," I murmured, "you know I can't promise you anything. This life that I'm a part of . . . it's just like The Doctor said. It's dangerous and nearly every time we step out of the TARDIS, there's a crisis we need to solve. I'll never truly be safe, but you know I'll try as hard as I can to stay alive and, if I fail in that, take as many bad guys with me as I can."
She sniffled. "Why can't you two go someplace there isn't any danger?"

My smile turned sad and I looked down at the couch. "Because, the TARDIS doesn't always take us where we want to go . . . she takes us where we need to go."

Her hands wiggled in my grip, and I released one of them so she could wipe her eyes. "Dahlia, are you . . . are you traveling with The Doctor because you want to or, or because you have to?" she asked quietly but urgently.

I . . . hadn't really thought of that before. Why was I traveling with The Doctor? I mean, yeah, he said he'd take me along even if the universe wouldn't threaten to collapse if he didn't, but why was I doing it? I knew the risks. Not just knew of them but actually knew them. Alone, I'd nearly died three times today! But when I thought about it, really thought about it—I knew the answer.

The smile that split my lips was genuine, filled with blissful happiness I rarely found myself able to feel. Rubbing intricate circle patterns on Ashley's palm, I breathed out, "While I probably would never have gotten the courage to demand a place on the TARDIS without the destruction of the universe hanging over my head, if The Doctor had asked me, I would've gone with him in a heartbeat. No second guesses."

Ashley didn't say anything else.

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There was no point in checking on my apartment. Ashley had saved the few personal things I had left, but there wasn't much. I never got around to decorating the place and making it into a home. The entire space had just been a glorified hotel room to me. Ashley had always asked me why I never redecorated or personalized beyond a few photos and books. Now she knew why.

"Don't go, sweetheart! You can get your flat back! Stay with us in the meantime! Ashley and I don't mind!" Jackie, of course, didn't seem to get why I wasn't staying.

Ashley rolled her eyes. "Mum, she can't stay! I already explained this to you." Well, she'd explained most of it anyway. Ashley told me she would explain more once I was gone. If she tried now, Jackie would never let me leave.

The Doctor was leaning against the TARDIS' doorframe, quirking an eyebrow as the small group following me, a smirk on his face. Sending him a nasty look, I addressed Jackie, "I would tell you not to worry, but you will anyway. The Doctor will keep me safe, even if it's just so he can brag about it later. The TARDIS is a time machine. I can be gone for months and come back before you guys even get home!" I gave each of them a hug and backed up towards the TARDIS.

It was Ashley who stopped me this time. She leaned in and motion for me to do the same. "Promise me you won't forget about us," she whispered, glaring at the ground and twisting her hands nervously.

I smiled and hugged her again. "Promise." And then I was side by side with The Doctor, clutching the console while he threw us into The Vortex again.

No, I wouldn't forget. I decided right then and there that no matter what happened, or what world was ending, I wouldn't forget that I had someone waiting for me.
Bad Day

The Doctor and I were relaxing in the kitchen today. He was nursing a mug of tea while I occasionally swigged my third Starbucks mocha iced coffee. The TARDIS, after learning of my obsession with the caffeinated drink, kept a continuous stock ready in the electric blue refrigerator.

When I first found the stash, I had praised the TARDIS to high heavens. The Doctor, however, did not approve of my choice in beverage. He had offered to make me tea, but I'd turned him down, informing him that I hated any and all form of tea.

"But you're from the southern United States! You’ve lived in England for a year!" he'd exclaimed.

I just shrugged. "Tea makes me sick. Don't know why."

Now we were lounging at the dining table after a day filled with nothing. Surprisingly, it had been The Doctor who had suggested a rest day. Granted, he hadn't been very polite with his justification ("You humans need time to relax. If I run you into the ground, you'll never keep up") but I knew he meant well.

The click of The Doctor's mug being set down brought me out of the Deadpool comic I had been enjoying. The Doctor had mocked my when I'd retrieved it, saying I should read something with value. Then I watched him grab what I knew was a trashy alien romance. 'Read something with value' my ass . . .

"Dahlia," The Doctor said, "I was wonderin' . . . about the person you were brought here to replace . . . could you tell me about them?"

I cringed. I knew he'd ask one day, but that didn't mean I wanted to talk about it. Sighing, I closed the comic and pushed it away.

"You don't have to if you don't want to . . . I mean, I know you don't like when I ask but—" The Doctor stumbled over his words, panicking. He probably thought we were going to start arguing again. I wasn't going to let that happen. We were going to have an adult conversation with no yelling for once.

Sighing again, I consoled him, "It's fine, Doctor. I understand your curiosity. And I guess you do have a right to know . . . it's not like either of us will ever meet her.

"Her name was Rose Tyler. Originally, she was Jackie Tyler's only child. In this universe, she was Ashley's twin sister. The reason I'm here is because she died a short time after birth. Everything else is the same." I could tell he was feeling awkward now. "Don't apologize, you have no reason to. I didn't know her," I interrupted his train of thought.

"What was she like?" he asked curiously.

I tapped my fingers on the table and attempted to stay as neutral as possible. "Sweet, I guess would be appropriate . . . and flirty. She was pretty, by many people's standards. Loyal, to the right person. Naïve to an extent, though that could’ve just been from living in a bubble her entire life. There were times when she acted exactly like Jackie, so courageous and bold comes to mind." Smiling sardonically, I added with only slight bitterness, "She was your perfect companion."

The Doctor's curiosity morphed to confusion. His eyebrows furrowed as he frowned and a crease formed between them.
Ah, so he noticed my tone for once . . .

"What did you think of her?" He tilted his head to the side.

I grimaced. "I was mostly neutral towards her."

"Why?"

"I felt that she was a bit too perfect." Wow, didn't I sound like the bitter old crone. "While she was bold and strong-willed, I don't think she stood up to you like she should. I think she was afraid you'd leave her back on Earth. Sometimes she would just retreat back into the bubble she had been raised in instead of opening up to new experiences." I sounded pathetic. All that bitterness over a dead girl.

"What did she look like?"

My blood boiled in jealousy at the question. Stupid, messed up feelings; I had no right to be jealous of a question he had a right to ask.

"I think . . . I think it would be best if, if I showed you," I suggested dispassionately.

He nodded and scooted his chair closer. Raising his hands to my head, The Doctor asked, "Ready?"

I projected the clearest memory of Rose Tyler I had to the front of my mind. The Doctor wouldn't probe any deeper than that. "Ready," I confirmed, closing my eyes. Moments later I felt the bliss of him entering my mind.

I felt him examine the memory of a smiling Rose from all angles, diligently leaving no detail unobserved. After several long moments, The Doctor released the mental connection, taking the warm blanket of his presence with it.

The Doctor looked me in the eye. "She's pretty . . . for a blonde."

I raised an eyebrow and forced my voice to sound teasing. "Thought you liked blondes."

He chuckled. "Nah. Found I have a preference for curly brunettes."

I swallowed thickly. I recognized what he was doing. He had told me, without actually saying it, that it was my move. I could either back down or meet his challenge.

But how had he known? His darkening gaze promised that he knew more than he let on.

What should I do? It would be all too easy to lean forward and give into temptation. I wouldn't even have to move very far; The Doctor was still invading my personal space as he tended to do. Would it be worth it, though? I knew my feelings (I wasn't denying what they were) went deeper than a nerd crush or simple lust. It wasn't love, not yet, but it could develop.

Personally, I was afraid of falling in love. Not just with The Doctor, but anyone. I'd never been in love before. Sure, I've had boyfriends in the past but nothing ever clicked correctly enough for something other than glorified friendship.


I straightened in my seat with a newfound determinate. The Doctor's eyes glinted sharply. He'd noticed I'd made a decision.
As Eleven would say "Geronimo".

A smile curled at The Doctor's mouth when I leaned forward, and he mirrored me. We were so close our breath skimmed the other's lips, and then the TARDIS lurched.

A panicked noise made its way out of my throat. Our chairs skidded across the floor several feet. I was luckier than The Doctor; his extra weight caused him to tumble onto the floor.

Sounding too much like Ten for comfort, The Doctor cried out, "What?" and clambered off the floor, rushing from the kitchen and to, most likely, the console room.

I curled my knees up to my chest, buried my face in them, and let out a scream of pure frustration.

We were running. Again. On another alien planet, through another alien forest, away from another alien tribe The Doctor had managed to piss off, in the distant year of 4283. The name of the solar system, planet, and species we were currently fleeing escaped my knowledge at the moment since, as you know, we were running for our lives. The Doctor would surely lecture me on the importance of useless trivia.

"Why did you have to insult their goddess?" I demanded angrily, my scowl deepening as a small branch whipped across my cheek.

"How was I supposed to know they were worshiping the statue?" The Doctor snapped back. He was a few feet ahead since he apparently 'remembered' where the parked the TARDIS.

I dodged a stump, snarling, "What do you mean—How couldn't you? Didn't the offerings, decorations, and fact that they were praying to the Almighty Goddess Elneera tip you off? Holy shit, dude, if being oblivious was an Olympic sport, you'd get the gold."

He looked back to glare at me but ended up stumbling over a shrub.

I would've cackled, but my lungs were preoccupied with breathing as evenly as possible. Oh well, I'd make fun of him later. Maybe I could be more creative this time. Instead of just a few snide remarks, I could put signs up around the TARDIS, all pertaining to shrubbery and how to keep your balance. Oh! If I asked nicely enough, the TARDIS might make random shrubs pop up in The Doctor's path and make him—

An insignificant part in the very back of my mind snapped into place, causing a chain reaction.

The air whooshed from my lungs as if I'd been punched in the gut. While I struggled to breath, my feet tangled themselves with a group of above-ground, corkscrew roots. I barely managed to right myself (flailing around wildly wasn't the best tactic no matter how easy Eleven make it seem). My right side, mostly the shoulder, slammed into a florescent, oak-like tree attached to the roots. I slouched against it and gasped for air; my windpipe felt like it was closing off. I started to choke.

I was alone.

I don't mean just here out in this damn glowing forest, even if that was true since The Doctor hadn't noticed I had involuntarily stopped running. No, I meant the entire universe. Everyone I knew from my old life was gone. I would never see them again.

Tears stung my eyes and blurred my vision. They stayed put even when I stubbornly tried to blink
them away.

_God, when The Doctor said it would hit me outta the blue, he meant it_, I tried to think in a snide tone but all I could muster was to sound defeated. Defeated and drowning in misery. Why did it have to happen now? Why couldn't it wait until I safely got to the TARDIS?

I sloppily wiped my eyes and nose, smearing salty water and shot across my face. I needed to keep going. Damn everything to Hell if I died because of a mental breakdown.

When I finally started moving, it was more of a show jog rather than a run, but I didn't care.

I was in near physical agony, forcing myself to move under the crushing weight of the depression. As I moved, I tried to think of something, anything, to take my mind off the hurt I felt. Nothing helped. Not even the normally reassuring weight of Koschei's watch against my thigh could comfort me.

I gave up fighting the depression. The only thing I could do was get back to the TARDIS.

Tripping over what was either a prickly shrub or a small animal, I was sent careening into a mossy wall. Dazed, I stumbled backwards over a slippery group of pebbles. Before I could fall painfully on my ass, a hand shot out of the darkness and gripped my wrist.

I blinked plainly. I didn't struggle.

"What were you thinking? Takin' a rest when there're angry natives after us, you know better than that," The Doctor scolded, hauling me into a standing position.

I didn't respond, but The Doctor didn't seem to care. He was running again and now forcing me along.

The natives were closer now; I hadn't noticed before, but I could hear their shrieks and cries of fury. Those were some seriously pissed off aliens.

The Doctor dragged me through the forest. We tore through bushes, trampled humming flowers, snapped branches, and just made tons of noise in general. We weren't trying to hide anymore. Hiding wouldn't keep us alive. Only running would.

I wasn't keeping track of where we were going or our surroundings. I was lost amongst the terror and misery and thoughts of _just keep running_. I didn't notice The Doctor had skidded to a stop. I crashed into his very solid form with a thud and lost my footing. My legs collapsed. The Doctor, quick as lightning, snapped my wrist forward, bringing me with it. When I righted myself, the reason for The Doctor's sudden pause faded into focus. The TARDIS. We'd found her.

I let out a low whine deep in my throat.

The Doctor dug through his pocket frantically. He jerked the key out and shoved it into the lock. Then he was shoving the door open and storming inside the TARDIS. I fumbled after him.

Shutting the door behind me with a soft click, I collapsed against it and slid to the floor. Once there, I pulled my knees to my chest and wrapped my arms around them.

The Doctor paid me no mind. He leaped around the console, smashing buttons and snapping down levers.

The engines ground together with the tell-tale noise and we were in the Vortex.
"Now that that's all settled— why did you stop? You've got more sense than that! I know you do!"
The Doctor whined. I didn't have to see him to hear his pout. "Dahlia?" His footsteps clanged on
the metal grating as he approached me.

He asked softly, "Dahlia? Are you all right? Are you hurt?" He knelt beside me, lightly touching
my arm.

I sniffed and looked up at him through watery eyes. "Doctor," I whimpered like a wounded animal,
unfurling my arms to reach for him.

Before I even spoke, understanding overtook his features. "Oh, Dahlia," he whispered
compassionately. The Doctor gathered me up, completely surrounding me in a protective embrace.
He sat down to curl me onto his lap.

He didn't say anything else. He just held me and allowed me to sob into his shoulder soaking his
jumper with tears and snot.

I was glad for it; I didn't need or want words. All I wanted was for someone to hold me and stroke
my back and hair like The Doctor was doing right now.

The console room was silent, yes, but it was a good silence, an understanding silence. I was being
crushed under new pain while The Doctor relived his older, still bleeding wounds. I vaguely
wondered how long it would take for him to collapse under the guilt and retreat, leaving me here to
fend for myself against the onslaught.

I absentmindedly tightened my grip on his clothing.

The Doctor shifted me in his arms.

My eyes snapped open. No! No, you can't! In a desperate attempt to keep him there, I clung to him,
even while he fought to stand.

"Sh, sshhh, it's all right," he murmured soothingly. "Up ya go now."

He lifted me bridal style and stood. The Doctor gracefully strolled down the halls of the TARDIS.
He stopped at a door, shoved it open, and walked in. Lifting me head to look around, I was able to
recognize my room. The Doctor gently laid me on the bed before backing up; alarmed, I jerked up
to grip his jacket, whimpering.

The Doctor's hands slid along mine reassuringly. "I'm not leavin'," he muttered firmly.

We had a small stare down until I reluctantly released him.

His hands skimmed along my hoodie, pulling down the zipper and carefully maneuvering my arms
from the sleeves; he folded it over the back of my desk chair.

The Doctor tugged my shoes off my feet. They hit the floor with solids thunks. He then toed off
his own boots, slipping out of the leather jacket at the same time. The Doctor moved to the
opposite side of the bed and slid in beside me. I rolled over to face him. He didn't ask if I was all
right; we both knew I wasn't, but I was still grateful.

The Doctor stroked my cheek. "I was alone when all this hit me. I'm not goin' to let you suffer like
I did," he whispered. His caress halted at my temple. He hesitantly asked, "May I?"

I nodded slowly and closed my eyes.
A burnt orange sky flared with two suns in front of my eyes. Red grass sprouted to life. Trees with glittering silver leaves swayed in a breeze. The Doctor and I lounged side by side amongst the red grass and firebirds, a Gallifreyan flower with red, feather-like petals and a curling orange stem. When the suns' light hit them just right flames sprung to life all around us.

Gallifrey. The Doctor was showing me Gallifrey.

The only time I had ever seen The Doctor's home world it had been on fire. At night, when I closed my eyes to sleep, I could still smell the ash and blood that had permeated the air—on a good night. Bad nights were when I could still hear the Time Lords scream as they were slaughtered by the Daleks. I didn't get much sleep on those nights.

I blocked out those thoughts. One mental breakdown at a time, thank you.

"This is one of the few memories I have of my home that wasn't spoiled by the war," The Doctor said quietly, breaking the silence. "In my earlier regenerations this is all I would do when I visited Gallifrey—for the most part. It's where I felt most at peace. Even now it's one of the few places where I feel truly comfortable."

I let The Doctor ramble. His presence and voice were more consoling than numerous words of comfort.

The Doctor talked about Gallifrey—about the planet, the capitol, the fashion (we both agreed it was too stuffy), traditions and ceremonies (he became nervous when he explained sexuality and marriages, but he did explain it more thoroughly than the others), and eventually came to Time Lord biology. Apparently, all his senses were heightened. Which meant he could smell and hear things humans couldn't... like pheromones and human companions working out their pent up sexual frustration. He didn't say so, but I knew it was implied.

My cheeks burned. I made sure to avoid The Doctor's probing gaze. Forcing myself not to stutter, I asked quickly, "Can I show you something?"

"Of course."

Smiling, I connected to my physical body and brought my fingers to The Doctor's temple. I focused on two images and then projected them into his mind.

On the plain of mental Gallifrey, a house appeared. It wasn't at all special, just a plain two-story cedar house with a tin roof and a front porch. Several cats lounged in the wooden swing off to the left. Soft plumes of smoke rose from the stone chimney.

"That's my house. It's where I was raised and where I was living before I came here," I explained.

The Doctor nodded but didn't let his stare waver from the house.

I pulled up the other image. Five people flickered into view on the porch; three men, two women.

I sat up. "The oldest guy's my dad. We didn't always get along, mostly for my views on religion. You know which one's my mom. Can you believe she's in her fifties? Barely looks thirty-five. That boy with the curly mop of black hair? That's my brother. Thinks he's so cool." I smiled again. "He tries harder than you do to prove it. He's really into dinosaurs, though. Not much for Syfy."

He frowned. "The other woman—she's your sister, yeah?"

"Mmhm."
"She's pregnant."

I stopped fiddling with the grass. "Yeah, five months along when I last saw her. You see the 6'6" wall of muscle beside her? That's her husband. Real nice guy, kinda awkward, but he's cool. He's an engineer."

The Doctor hummed in acknowledgement. "You and your sister look almost exactly alike."

I snorted. "Yeah, even though we're five years apart, she's a taller, slimmer version of me with straight hair . . . but I'm weirder," I said.

We sat in silence.

"Doctor," I prompted near silently, "I miss them."

"I know," he replied sadly.

"I want to go home."

"I know."

"But I can't," I finished, tears brimming again.

"I know," he whispered.

"Doctor," I sniffled. "Don't leave me."

The Doctor sat up and settled his arm around my shoulder, curling me into his side. He tilted my head to rest on his shoulder.

"I won't."
The Doctor had avoided me for a few weeks after he returned my sonic screwdriver. I was still confused about that, too. How did it get into the console room? And why didn't he ask more questions about where I got it? At first, I thought I had done something wrong or he was angry about keeping my sonic a secret for so long, but when I confronted him about it, all The Doctor could stutter was that it wasn't my fault. It was a Time Lord thing and I didn't want to understand because it was a disgusting biology thing. Right after telling me this, he scurried from the room faster than I'd ever seen him move.

I didn't seek him out after that. If it was that embarrassing, then I wouldn't bother him. Maybe it was the male, Time Lord version of a period. If that was the case, then I definitely didn't want to be around when he switched moods.

Now though, a month and a half later, he was back to his old self. Sometimes he wouldn't meet my eyes for long periods of time, but I didn't think anything of it. The Doctor wasn't actively avoiding me, and we were back to adventuring around the universe.

Now all we had to do was not die during the landing.

"Doctor!" I screamed, clinging to railing with every ounce of strength I had. "What the fuck did you just press?!"

He was attempting to stabilize us midflight. At the same time, he was trying to land. It was going as well as one could imagine.

"Don't you start with me! I punched in the correct calculations! She's just bein' a bit difficult today!" he retorted.

Lights flashed angrily around us. Steam started filling the console room from places I couldn't even see. Sparks flowered from the base of the central column. A series of buttons just to my right flashed in an oddly steady pattern. Too steady to be caused by us spinning out of control.

I made my way to the console, slowly and unsteadily but surely. Thank you, Sexy. Don't worry, I'll smack him in the head for the both of us when we're not about to die.

Upon pressing the last button, I flicked the temporal stabilization switch. The TARDIS ceased being tossed around like a tree in a tornado. I beamed proudly when the grinding noise of the
engines filled my ears. Finally, we were landing. Now . . . where was The Doctor?

"Doctor?" I asked, frowning and furrowing my eyebrows together as I peered over the console to where I last saw him.

He popped up from the floor, looking slightly disheveled. He fixed his jacket and then peered over the console at the buttons I had pressed. The Doctor leered at where my hands still rested. "What'd you do?"

I scoffed, "I landed the TARDIS. What were you doing?"

He shot me a nasty look, but it faded quickly when his gaze landed on the TARDIS doors. Grinning, he asked me, "My turn or yours?"

A smile broke my stern expression. "Yours, last time I opened the doors we were on the edge of a cliff on Saronoff and nearly fell to my death. I'll let you take the risk this time, thank you very much."

The Doctor snorted, grabbing my hand when he walked around the console toward the doors. As agreed, he peeked out first, making sure the coast was clear before leading me outside. The Doctor was instantly enamored by our surroundings and skipped off to examine what looked like a glowing set of alien teeth. I, on the other hand, froze in panic.

Henry Van Statten's museum. So soon? Why? Everything was going so well. I've felt more human than ever since my breakdown, and The Doctor and I have become closer, disregarding his awkward episode. This . . . this is going to ruin everything. No matter what I do, The Doctor will still hate me for not telling him about the Dalek. I bit my lip and watched The Doctor. I needed to get him out of here. Maybe if I asked really nicely he'll let us leave. Or should I use the fear road instead? I'll have to be very careful if I do, one wrong word and he'll want to stay here even more, if just to take care of the monster.

"Doctor . . ." I called out quietly, allowing my fear and worry to make my voice quiver.

His attention immediately snapped from the artifact he was examining to me. "Dahlia? What's wrong?" he asked, taking long strides until he stood in front of me.

Guilt made my gut turn nauseously. I didn't want to deceive him, but I couldn't let him know about the Dalek . . . I wrung my hands together and stared at the floor.

"We need to leave," I muttered lowly. Then I looked up at him and added, "Now."

The Doctor frowned, pursing his lips. "Dahlia," he said slowly. My heart sank. "We can't leave. I have to know what's makin' that signal. After we do that, then we can leave. Okay?"

His tone made me feel like an ignorant child. I gnawed on my lip again. How much should I tell him? Nothing about the Dalek, of course, but how do I get across the urgency that I need? Panic and guilt were not the best supporters of rational thought; all I could think about was his upcoming anger. And disappointment. I couldn't take it if The Doctor was disappointed in me. Anger I could take, but I didn't want to be just another ape to him.

"Please, please, listen to me, Doctor. We have to leave. We can't be here!" My voice rose in volume at the end. The panic was moving from my gut to my chest. I could feel its spider-like fingers closing in around my lungs. My breath came in shorter bursts.

The Doctor narrowed his eyes at me. He knew something was off. Oh God . . . please don't let him
notice how bad the situation really is.

"Why not? How bad will it get if we stay?"

_Doctor, for fuck's safe! For once in your goddamn life will you just listen to me?! No. No, you won't, because you have to know everything! God, I hate you sometimes._

I took a deep breath to curb my anger. It would do me no good today. At least the remorse and dread had calmed to only slightly unpleasant levels.

"Very, very bad. Now come on, back to the TARDIS." I gripped his hand, harder than intended, and started toward the ship, but The Doctor didn't budge.

His frown deepened. "Dahlia, just tell me what's so dangerous. I'll fix it, I promise. Just give me some time."

My eyes widened. Time. Was there a time limit to how long we would stay undetected? Or were the guards only triggered by the alarm? Van Statten probably had bugs and security cameras all over the place; it wouldn't be long before we were discovered.

I shook my head and scowled at him over my shoulder. "This isn't something you can fix, Doctor. Let's go," I said.

Something behind his eyes hardened underneath the worry. It wasn't The Oncoming Storm—not yet—but the resemblance was enough to make me shudder.

The Doctor wrenched his hand from mine and glared at me. He sneered, "Don't tell me what I can and cannot do, Dahlia Tombew. No matter how much you know about me, you still don't know what I am capable of. Now, tell me. What. Is. Wrong."

I shoved the fear into the corner with the guilt; the panic seemed to be staying this time. "I can't. Doctor, we need to—"

He cut me off, "No, we're not goin' anywhere 'til you stop keepin' things from me!" He turned me around so he could plant both his hands on my shoulders, keeping me firming in place.

I swallowed thickly. His eyes glared into mine. We'd been over this. Twice. Would he ever trust me? Probably not. I was suddenly struck by how stupid I had been to think he'd ever fully trust me. I was from another dimension, sent here to replace a dead girl who should be here blindly following him instead. I knew nearly everything about him. I knew his past, present, and future. The Doctor would never trust someone who could destroy him so easily.

Shoving the irrelevant feeling of betrayal away, I pleaded, "Doctor, please just listen to—"

"No!" he shouted, "Tell. Me. Now!"

I cowered immediately and some resisting part of me gave up. "It's a Dalek!" The words spilled from my lips before I could think and, as soon as I said it, I knew I'd made possibly the worst mistake of my entire life.

The Doctor's eyes blazed with fury as his eyes went black with The Oncoming Storm. Every ounce of worry he had shown earlier evaporated the instant the word Dalek left my mouth.

I stumbled away from him backwards, but his hand shot out and wrapped around my wrist, locking me in his titanium grip. His glare froze me, daring me to attempt any form of escape or
"A Dalek?" The Doctor growled through gritted teeth. "There's a Dalek here, and you didn't tell me?"

I winced when his grip tightened. I could feel the bruise forming. "Doctor, you're hurting me. Please let go."

"No. Not until you tell me why," he snarled.

"I-I couldn't . . . We agreed . . . I'm not supposed to—" I stumbled. What was I supposed to say? I thought we'd settled this ages ago. Apparently, The Doctor hadn't been satisfied with the outcome of our arguments.

He sneered again. "That's what I thought." He then started dragging me toward the TARDIS.

My heart skipped a beat in surprise. We were leaving? Okay . . . okay, I can work with this. We'll leave and have another screaming tournament. I'll take the brunt of his anger and deal with it. I'd suffer through anything to get away from this place.

The Doctor paused before opening the TARDIS doors. He looked me up and down once and turned back to the TARIDS to open it, barking, "Should've known you were nothing more than another stupid ape."

What?

In my mindset the entire world just fell apart. Another stupid ape? That's how he saw me now? Because I'd done what I was supposed to do? My heart shattered. Tears burned my eyes and slid down my cheeks; I made no move to stop them as I normally would have.

Three words. Three words were all it took for him to break me. Why was I so surprised? It had only taken him six to topple Harriet Jones, and she was supposed to bring about Britain's Golden Age. I was just a teenaged girl.

The Doctor paid my silent suffering no mind. He wrenched the TARDIS door open and shoved me inside. I stumbled and nearly fell but caught myself on the railing.

"I'll deal with you later—after I kill the Dalek." And then the door slammed shut.

My brain, still addled with shock, took a few moments to process this, but when it did, I pushed aside whatever feelings I had and rushed to the door. I tried to open it. The door rattled but didn't open. "Doctor?" I asked, panic causing my voices to climb several octaves. "Doctor, open the door! You have to let me out! Doctor!" I banged on the doors until my fists were nearly numb with pain.

Was he even still out there?

I dashed to the console, nearly crashing to the metal grating floor in my rush, and found the monitor linked to the camera outside.

Yes, there he was. He was scowling at the various objects on the wall with his hands shoved in his pockets. I felt a spark of hope. Maybe he wouldn't be able to find his way around . . . Then, The Doctor pulled his sonic screwdriver from his pocket. He pressed one button, and the alarm sounded. Within seconds, he was surrounded by armed guards and being escorted away.

"No!" I screamed. "No! Doctor! Come back!" Screaming at the screen was pointless, the TARDIS
was blocking all communication from inside the TARDIS; The Doctor hadn't even heard me when I attempted to knock the doors down.

Okay . . . calm down, Dahlia. Think. How do you get out of a locked TARDIS?

Obviously with the key.

Taking my spade key from around my neck, I went back to the doors and tried it. All I got was another rattling sound.

Don't panic. Try the sonic.

I slipped the sonic out of my pocket and switched it to the proper setting. The Doctor had been teaching me all the settings. The only ones I had managed to remember were the ones I found most useful, which was about fifteen.

The whirring of the sonic eased my panic. This would work. The sonic always worked. I'd be out of here in a minute or two and then I could go save The Doctor and we'd be out of here—

The door didn't open. The lock didn't even twitch. My heart picked up speed, thudding in my chest. Icy fear shocked my gut and spread through my veins. My breathing became labored.

The sonic hadn't work. Why hadn't it worked? The sonic always worked.

What else could I do?

In a wave of rage, I slammed my entire body against the doors. Not the best plan, but I was too frustrated to think. I just needed to get out.

A new anger pulsed through my head, but this was different than the frustration and worry I already felt. This anger wasn't mine.

The lights of the console room pulsed; an angry buzzing filled the room, and I knew. The TARDIS was angry with me. I could feel her in my mind. She was ranting about how I had hurt her thief. I didn’t know how I knew what the buzzing meant. I couldn't explain it if I tried.

"I'm sorry! I know you're angry, but I still regret telling him! How could I bring it up? 'Oh, hey, Doctor, yeah, you know how you sacrificed your entire race to save the universe from the Daleks? Well, there's a problem with that. Ya see there's a Dalek in this guy Van Statten's underground museum. Why didn't I tell you earlier? Well, I believe that if I tell you anything, the universe will implode again'," I ranted to the ship. She probably wasn't listening, but it never hurt to explain yourself.

The doors still didn't open.

Pressing my forehead against the wood, I exhaled heavily through my nose. What else could I do? The key didn't work; the sonic didn't work. The TARDIS was resisting every notion of opening the doors. So, what could I try? I couldn't force the doors open in any normal way, so what about an abnormal way?

I shoved away from the doors and ran past the console and through the corridors. My feet converse clad feet clanged along the metal grating.

I only had one other option. The laser screwdriver; if the TARDIS wouldn’t open her doors for me, I would force them to. I could use the setting I'd used on Platform One. Melt the doors open. The
TARDIS would repair herself while I rescued The Doctor. I still didn't know how I was going to do that without waking up the Dalek, but I was working on it. I had a few ideas, they just needed fleshing out.

Hadn't I gone through here before? Was I going in the right direction? I was going the way I always went. I should've been there by now.

Out the corner of my eye, one of the corridors shifted.

I skidded to a stop. My God... the TARDIS was trapping me. I knew she was angry but not angry enough to do this. She was toying with me. She was the TARDIS, and I was trapped inside her. A rat in a genius, sentient machine. I would never get out. And The Doctor was trapped as the newest edition to Van Statten's museum. How long had it been now? Ten? Twenty minutes? Maybe thirty? Van Statten knew what The Doctor was by now and was torturing him. Restoring the Dalek was what forced Van Statten to release The Doctor, and with me trapped in here... 

I leaned heavily against a wall. There was no point in moving. I couldn't outsmart the TARDIS. I couldn't unlock the doors. I was trapped. The Doctor was a hostage. The TARDIS hated me. End of the line.

Go left.

I frowned. Who was that? There was no one on the ship except me, and the TARDIS couldn't talk, at least not to me.

Go left, you stupid girl.

I knew that voice. Koschei? I asked hesitantly.

Who did you think it was? Your precious Doctor? he sneered. Now go left.

Pursing my lips, I did as I was told, albeit slowly. How'd he know which way was the right one? And was it really safe to take directions from a voice in my head?

Yes, it is. Now move your arse, ape.

You've gotten rude, I snipped back, taking off down the left corridor.

Keep going straight. You'd be rude, too, if you were stuck as a voice in a silly human's head.

The corridors shifted. Yeah, what's up with that?

Sharp right. You still have my fob watch. Before I was erased from existence, I managed to seal a fraction of my regenerative energy inside it.

I turned right. Regenerative energy? But you were being erased, not just dying.

He sighed heavily, and I could feel his irritation in the back of my mind. It was both. When I went to your world—a another left—my body started breaking down. When we got back to mine, I was being erased.

Narrowly missing a newly grown wall, I dove left. I was almost there, just one more corner. Why'd you do it, though?

Koschei scoffed. Any half brain could see that you would need help, ape.
But I could hear the tone of his voice. He was seeking my approval. He wanted to know I didn't mind having his consciousness roaming around in my head. And he was still guilty. I sighed internally. *Koschei, you shouldn't feel guilty anymore. I know why you did it, and I'm not mad at you. Don't know why but I haven't been able to keep a grudge against you . . . and I don't mind having you around. In fact, it'd be better if you spoke up more often. As you can see, The Doctor and I tend to argue more than get along, and I could always use your company.*

*One more right,* he muttered. I could tell he was smiling.

Koschei was correct. I saw my door as soon as I turned the last corner. I grinned, even though I was panting tiredly; get the laser screwdriver, blast the doors open, save The Doctor. Simple plan, easy steps. Nothin' to it.

My gut sunk with a fear I pushed away. The fear was completely rational. The door to my room wouldn't open. The TARDIS had locked it.

"No! Goddammit! TARDIS, open the door!" I screamed, pounding at the door with my fists. Another pointless action. Why, God, why had I gotten into the habit of leaving my bag in my room?

The Doctor was being tortured by now. I remembered what he'd looked like on the show. Reality would be so much worse because it wasn't just actors faking it. The Doctor was really being tortured and there was nothing I could do about it.

"TARDIS, please," I begged, "please, let me leave. The Doctor needs my help! He's being tortured. Van Statten's going to keep him for his collection. So please, please just open the door . . ."

Brief scrapings of metal; the corridors were shifting again. The TARDIS’ touch drifted at the edges of my mind. She urged me to move, down the pathway she had just created.

Heaving a sigh of defeat, I did as I was told. My footsteps were heavy and graceless. I walked slowly; there was no point in rushing.

The new corridor led me back to the console room, and I almost collapsed on the captain's chair, but the TARDIS urged me forward. I stared blankly at the doors when I stopped at them. My hands twitched anxiously. Part of me was aching to try opening them again, but I wasn't sure if I could take another bout of disappointment.

Get away from the doors before you beat your fists bloody against them. I started to move away, but I stopped at the click of a lock. One of the doors slid open a sliver. A light touch caused it to creak open further. Cautiously, I pushed the door open and peered out. No guards. Though, I didn't really expect them to be there. They thought they'd caught the intruder. No one thought to look for an accomplice.

"Thank you," I whispered to the TARDIS, caressing the wood before dashing to the elevator at the far end of the hall.

What floor was The Doctor being held on, again?

A voice in the back of my mind that I suspected to be Koschei ordered me to press the button for Level Four, so I did so. After the doors opened I wandered until I found Adam's workshop. The little rat was attempting to put together two separate pieces of technology. Unfortunately for him,
one was Drahvin and the other was Slyther. Not to mention the fact that one was a music holder
and the other was a food cooker.

Adam didn't hear my approach. I had gotten quite good at sneaking up on people; it helped that I
practiced on The Doctor. His super hearing was much more difficult to foil.

"Where's The Doctor?" My question startled Adam; so much that both pieces of technology, and
the tool he was holding clattered to the ground while he let out a very girly shriek, cowering in his
chair with both hand covering his head.

I scowled. "I asked you a question. Don't make me ask again."

He finally turned around. I wasn't too far away, but any farther and I might have missed the glint in
his eye. Oh God . . . please don't tell me he's attracted to me. It was annoying enough to have to
watch him flirt with Rose; I'd rather not have to endure it myself.

"Who are you?" Adam questioned, rising from his seat. He didn't pick up the fallen items, ignoring
them in favor of closing the distance between us by a foot. "How'd you get in here?"

I made sure to keep my expression as bitchy and disgusted as I could (it wasn't hard at all). I wasn't
here to make friends, and I definitely wasn't here to invite Adam along to see the universe. I wanted
The Doctor, not this greedy, flirty moron.

"All you need to know is that I'm here with The Doctor, and we should've left here half an hour
ago," I responded coldly.

My tone didn't seem to dissuade him. In fact, Adam seemed to take my aloof stance as a challenge.
Smirking in a way that he probably thought was attractive, Adam said, "Give me your name and
I'll tell you where they are."

I eyed him like he was dirt beneath my shoe. Irritation itched beneath my skin. I was going to break
his nose if he kept this up. I managed to not show any outward signs of anger; if he knew he was
getting to me, it would only spur him on.

Ignoring his subtle demand, I asked, "What floor is The Cage on?"

He was taken aback by my question. He apparently thought I was clueless about this entire place.
"How do you know about The Cage?"

I snorted and crossed my arms. "I know a lot about this place. I know this is Van Statten's
underground museum in Utah. That Van Statten believes he owns the Internet, which is fuckin'
stupid. I know your name is Adam and that you were brought here to catalogue alien scrap that you
know absolutely nothing about. You've been told you're a genius, but you're not. You currently
believe you can seduce me, which you can't because I think you're one of the most irritating people
I have ever met. And I know that The Cage holds Van Statten's only living specimen." I smirked
condescendingly. "Now tell me, Adam, where is Van Statten currently torturing The Doctor?"

Adam gaped at me for several seconds, flapping his jaw uselessly up and down as he stumbled for
something to say. Finally, he cried out indignantly, "I am too a genius!"

I scowled fully, baring my teeth at the fool. "Out of everything I said, you latch onto the comment
about your fuckin' IQ? Not the part where I asked you where Van Statten was torturing my friend?"

He ignored me, choosing instead to glare toxically. "I am a genius, and I can prove it."
"Oh? Is there a set of toy blocks around here somewhere?" I sneered.

"Then if you're so smart, why don't you prove it?" Adam snarled. He stormed over to where he had been working before and scooped up the previously forgotten technology.

I rolled my eyes. *Ain't nobody got time for this.* "There's nothing to fix. Those are two separate pieces of technology from two very different species. And no, they aren't weapons. Most of the crap you have here if just useless junk that's either broken or requires a few different appendages to operate. Now answer my gorram question!"

The boy's stunned and slightly awed look quickly contorted to fury and envy. He tried to hide the latter, but his face was like an open book.

"Your companion isn't being tortured!" he snapped, tossing the scrap onto a worktable.

I stomped toward him. I was sick of playing his games and dealing with his shit. I was finding The Doctor, even if I had to pummel this idiot to get to him.

"Look, asshole," I growled, invading his personal space and trapping him against a table, "you don't like me, and I sure as hell don't like you. Where. Is. The. Doctor. I'm not asking again. Next time you ignore the question, I'll break your nose."

"He isn't being tortured, and I'll prove it." Adam gripped my wrist in a bruising grip and led me toward the elevators.

Snatching my wrist back, I barked out, "I can follow just fine. Just make sure you don't get lost, boy."

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We entered The Cage. Of course, there was no trace of The Doctor or Van Statten, just a bunch of scientists and armored guards.

Adam marched through the lobby-like space outside The Cage. He didn't pause when someone ordered him to stop, just flashed his badge and said, "Level three access, special clearance from Mr. Van Statten."

I stopped before we entered The Cage. "Where do you think you're going?" I demanded.

Adam glared at me over his shoulder, pausing at the entrance to The Cage. "Inside The Cage to show you where The Doctor is," he spat back.

"No, you're not. You all have no idea what that creature actually is, or what it's capable of. You're not setting foot in that cell."

He scoffed, "And I suppose you do?"

"Yes. I also know The Doctor isn't in there. Van Statten took him captive as soon as The Doctor made it known that he knew what species the alien was. And now The Doctor's being tortured because of what he is," I said lowly.

Adam rolled his eyes and continued into The Cage. Scowling, I followed. I wasn't about to trust that idiot not to want to touch the damn thing.

When he got inside Adam gave the room a puzzled look. "Where are they?"
"I highly doubt the room will answer," I mocked.

Giving me another scowl, Adam edged closer to the Dalek.

My skin crawled. Flashes of Daleks blackening the sky of Gallifrey, slaughtering Time Lords by the hundreds, wracked my brain. I didn't feel the fury The Doctor had felt when he saw the Dalek, only a nagging feeling that I should run as far away as possible.

Back in my world, Daleks had never been the most terrifying enemy of The Doctor. The Weeping Angels were always the worst and were quickly followed by The Silence. But here? With what I had experienced through The Doctor’s memories? Oh, yes, I truly understood the meaning of terror now.

I gripped Adam's collar and jerked him back. "Don't go near it."

"Why not?"

"Be-cause," I drawled, "that particular species of alien in exceptionally dangerous. The only reason both of us aren't dead is because it's too weak to do anything."

Adam shoved my hand away. "Since you first strolled in here, all you've done is be rude and order me around. What do you have against me?"

I scowled at him. "Other than you're a greedy, deceptive little bastard who would sell out anyone if it meant getting whatever you wanted? Nothing. Now back away from the alien."

"And what if I don't want to?" he challenged, getting in my personal space.

"Then I'll drag you out of here." I went to grab him by the scruff of his neck again, but he dodged, maneuvering behind me. Before I could do anything, Adam was shoving me with all his strength toward the Dalek.

No, I thought. I flailed helplessly, hoping to crash onto the floor but that didn’t happen. I crashed into the Dalek hands first. My palms landed right on the cold metal of its crown. A light burning sensation spread through my hands; I could feel part of my genetic code being taken from my body and healing the monster beneath me.

Pushing off the creature, I landed on my ass and practically crab walked away as fast as possible. My stare never moved from the glowing imprints of my palms.

The eye stalk of the Dalek brightened, and it announced: "Genetic material extrapolated—initiate cellular reconstruction!"

Not even a second later, the Dalek burst from the chains holding it and started to advance on us.

I leaped to my feet and ran. Adam was already halfway out the door.

"Condition red! Repeat, condition red! This is not a drill!" A voice shouted over the intercom.

The Doctor took over the intercom. "Dahlia, get out of there!"

I spared some breath to talk, "No! I was going to have a nice tea party with the damn thing!"

Adam turned on me, snarling. "This is your fault!"

"Don't blame me, you dumb fuck! You're the one who shoved me into it!" I snapped back. I turned
away from him to address everyone in the room. "Fighting the Dalek is pointless! If you stay here all you're doing is giving it something to kill. Run now and you might be able to live."

A soldier cocked his gun and aimed at the door. "Don't worry, ma'am. That door is set with millions of security protocols. It'll never get through."

I gave him a pitying look. "The Dalek can hack billions of protocols in seconds. It'll be out before you know it."

He smiled grimly at me. "Then we'll shoot it until it dies."

I shook my head. "If you insist on staying aim for the eyepiece, that's its only weak spot."

The nameless man nodded and motioned to the other soldiers to aim for the door. They didn't stand a chance.

"Dahlia, I said move!" The Doctor ordered again.

I took off down the hall with Adam tagging along. The female soldier from the show joined us.

"No matter what, even if it's your job to protect us, don't stop running. Your gun won't do a damn thing. The only thing we can do is run," I told her, briefly staring her down before looking forward again.

Diana Goddard came over the intercom this time. "All guards to converge in the Metaltron cage, immediately."

The three of us ran through a security post full of guards. "Civilians! Let them through!" Our soldier shouted.

"I don't want a scratch on its body work! Do you hear me? Do you hear me?!!" Van Statten called out through the intercom.

*Van Statten, if the Dalek doesn't kill you, I will.*

We came to the stairs and Adam and the soldier stopped. Their naivety infuriated me. Did the simpletons understand when I said to keep running?

"Ha! It's trapped! Stupid pepper shaker!" Adam cackled.

I ignored him, taking hold of the soldier and tugging her up the stairs. "It's not trapped. Daleks can fly."

The soldier looked at me in horror. "What?"

I gritted my teeth and hissed out. "It can fucking fly! What didn't you understand?!!"

We were running again just when the Dalek came into our sight.

The soldier attempted to get me to release my grip. "Let go! I can buy you time."

"No way, lady. All you'll do is add another corpse," I replied.

The fear I felt had been overwhelming at first. Now, the adrenaline and panic and events taking place cleared my head. I was thinking in rapid jumbles. Everything was going as it did in the show. All I had to do was play my part. And not get killed beforehand. Just another day on the job for
Dahlia Tombew.

The Doctor had taken the microphone for the intercom from Van Statten again. Hearing his voice invigorated my muscles to keep moving and not just give out.

"The Dalek's surrounded by a force field. The bullets are melting before they even hit home, but it's not indestructible. If you concentrate your fire, you might get through. Aim for the dome, the head, and the eyepiece. That's the weak spot," he instructed the ignorant soldiers. I knew they wouldn't listen, but there was always that slight glimmer of hope that reality would be different.

That particular type of hope was childish.

The commander shouted "Hold fire!" while our surviving trio ran through the warehouse and past the strategically placed soldiers.

An instinct told me to look back, to watch the Dalek advance. I didn't know why, but I obeyed.

My eyes landed on the Dalek, and I could feel the connection I had unintentionally created. Even if I couldn't see it, I knew the single eye the Dalek had staring me down, assessing me. Koschei's watch burned in my pocket.

I swallowed in fear. What if it knew? Could the Dalek tell I had part of a Time Lord with me? Or was Koschei's signal too weak to show up on the creature's radar? I didn't care to find out if it did or didn't. I turned around and continued running.

My phone went off, and I struggled to retrieve it from my pocket. The soldier stared at me incredulously. I knew what she was thinking: How could I take a phone call at a time like this?

"Doctor! Hey, yeah, I know what you're thinking of doing, and I know you have to do it. We're on Level 49 and running as fast as we can," I panted into the speaker, not giving him time to talk.

"Dahlia, you've got to hurry. I can't keep them open," The Doctor said desperately. "I'm so sorry. I should've listened to you."

I groaned. "You really think this is the best time for that? You can beg for forgiveness later, preferably after I hit you and scream for a long time." We were on Level 46.

The bulkhead ahead was closing. Adam dove through first. I knew he wouldn't wait, but it still lit a fire in my gut. I wish I had punched him when I had the chance.

The soldier was right with me. I could tell from the set of her jaw she knew we wouldn't make it. She could've easily left me behind, but she hadn't. I wanted to cry with gratification. The woman didn't know me, but she wouldn't let me die alone. So, I made a choice.

Easing my pace just enough to get directly behind her, I used as much force as I could muster to shove her through the closing doors. I came to a stop scant inches from the metal, jerking my hands away so my fingers wouldn't get caught in the doors.

Well . . . this seems a bit dramatic. I leaned against the bulkhead and started easing my breathing. I lifted my phone to my ear again. "Doctor?"

"Dahlia . . ." he choked out.
I could picture him in that room with Van Statten. He was hunched over, watching me on the security camera and thinking about how this was all his fault. For once I couldn't find a fault in that reasoning.

"I didn't make it," I finished lowly. I closed my eyes. The Dalek was getting closer; I could feel it.

"Dahlia . . . Dahila, I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry."

I sighed. "Shut up, Doctor. Do you really think that, if I'm going to die, the last thing I want to hear is your apologies? I tried to warn you. You didn't listen. What more is there to say?" I was too weary to be angry with him.

"A lot. There's so much I haven't told you, that I wanted to say but didn't," The Doctor confessed.

"The Dalek's almost here," I muttered. I could hear it now. A few more second and I'd be able to see it.

The Doctor took a deep breath and whispered, "Dahlia, I—"

"Exterminate!" the Dalek shrieked.

I exhaled shakily. "Sorry, Theta, seems like I won't get to hear your confession. Remember to tell Ashley and Jackie what happened to me. And make it sound cool, not too dramatic, though . . . bye." I hung up and stared full on at the Dalek.

"I feel your fear," it croaked.

"Probably."

"Daleks do not fear. Must not fear." It's death ray shot wildly at the walls, floor and ceiling all around me. I flinched away from each beam of light. "You gave me life. What else have you given me? I am contaminated!" it demanded hysterically.

"I'm sorry," I said quietly. Really, what did one say to a Dalek who was likely to kill them if they so much as twitched wrong?

The Dalek herded me to face the security camera. The Doctor was on the screen below the camera. His face lit up when he saw me.

"Open the bulkhead or she dies," the Dalek threatened.

In the background, I heard Van Statten ask who I was, what I was doing here, and how had I gotten into the building. All those questions were ignored.

"'Sup, Doc. Guess ya didn't think you'd see me again, huh?" I teased tiredly.

Whatever he wanted to say was cut off by the Dalek. "Open the bulkhead!" It jabbed its death ray into the small of my back, making me shift uncomfortably.

"This is the part where I bravely order you to not do what the murdering Dalek says. Sooooo, I'm not important blah blah blah don't do it blah blah if it gets out, it'll kill everyone etcetera etcetera . . . ." I droned on apathetically.

When the Dalek spoke again, its tone bordered on irritated. "What use are emotions if you will not save the woman you love?"
The Doctor turned his shocked gaze from me to the Dalek and then back to me. I closed my eyes and whispered to myself, "He doesn't love you. He doesn't love you. It's just a line. It's not true." But the look on The Doctor's face... it was like a secret he'd been keeping hidden for so long had been revealed... Did that count for anything?

"It is true. The Doctor loves you," the Dalek seemed to scoff.

I looked over my shoulder at it. "I highly doubt that. We argue as much as rivals do and he locked me in the TARDIS when we got here because I didn't tell him you were here. I infuriate him."

"The Doctor loves you," it repeated, shoving me forward when the bulkhead opened.

We entered the elevator. I can't tell you how bizarre it is to stand inside a tiny elevator next to a Dalek. The cheesy elevator music was just the bow on the present.

"Why have I not killed you?" the Dalek asked suddenly, spinning its eyestalk around to stare at me. "Why are you still alive? My function is to kill. What am I? What am I?"

"When you absorbed my DNA, it morphed you. It's changing you. I'm sorry. I didn't want this to happen," I replied quietly, staring at the ground. "I know you would've preferred to have died as a full Dalek."

The first thing we saw when the elevator doors opened was Van Statten. He was just... standing there... doing nothing. Well, okay, he looked like he was about to piss himself but that was it.

The Dalek rolled forward. "Van Statten. You tortured me. Why?" It demanded in a shrieking voice.

Van Statten stumbled backwards and away from the Dalek. He sputtered, "I wanted to help you. I just... I don't know. I-I was just trying to help. I thought if we could get through to you, if we could mend you... I wanted you better, I'm sorry!" His back hit a wall. The Dalek stopped inches from him. "I'm so sorry! I swear! I just wanted you to talk!"

"Then hear me talk now. Exterminate! Exterminate! Exterminate!" the Dalek crowed.

Was it wrong that I found that funny?

The Dalek fell silent and turned its eyestalk to me. "You will not stop me?"

Van Statten gave me a pleading look. I shrugged. "Why should I? I don't even like Van Statten. He was torturing my friend a short while ago! He tortured you just to 'hear you speak' for God knows how long. Why shouldn't you kill him? He's a waste of space."

If the Dalek had an eyebrow to raise I was pretty sure that's what it would've done. "You are different than The Doctor's other companions."

I shrugged again. "Yeah, I guess." I frowned and look at the terrified Van Statten. "I have to ask though... is this what you want? To keep killing like that's all there is to you? Because I'll tell you —I don't think he's worth it."

The Dalek seemed to contemplate what I was saying. It whirred around to glance at Van Statten for a second before turning back to me. "I want... freedom," it croaked out slowly, almost unsurely.

I managed a small, tired smile. "All right then, let's go."
The Dalek led the way down the corridors to the Level 01 parking garage. I stayed a few paces behind, not wanting to get hit in the head by any rocks when the Dalek blasted the ceiling. Still, I flinched when the death ray shattered the concrete, and sunlight streamed through the hole.

Stepping up to stand beside the alien, I basked in the warmth of the sun. I finally smiled a real smile. "You're free. Sorry if it's a bit anticlimactic."

"How . . . does . . . it . . . feel?" I didn't answer. I just watched the metal casing open and reveal the one-eyed creature. The Dalek stretched one of its tentacles out to feel the sun.

Swallowing down my nerves, I timidly reached inside the opening and caressed the Dalek with the back of my fingers. It wasn't as bad as I thought, just really cold and wrinkly, like it was really sick.

"Dahlia, get out of the way, now!" The Doctor shouted.

I was surprised I didn't jump. I hadn't heard him coming. It didn't matter anyways, I didn't move from where I was. All I did was remove my hand from the Dalek and turn halfway to watch The Doctor.

I stared at him lazily, blinking a few times before simply saying, "No."

The Oncoming Storm took over. "That thing killed hundreds of people," he hissed out, not lowering the enormous gun he was carrying.

The raw hate and animosity The Doctor was radiating enticed something in me. Some unexplored corner of my mind was excited, practically giddy, that he was so furious. I felt the urge to prod at his wounds, mock his anger and tease him into firing the gun. A snarky line welled up in my throat and I almost said it, but at the last moment I did the smart thing. "He's not the one pointing the gun at me."

The Doctor shook his head and said with a wavering voice, "I've got to do this. I've got to end it. The Daleks destroyed my home, my people. I've got nothing left."

"Just look at it, Doctor," I said, stepping to the side so The Doctor could watch the Dalek warm itself in the sunlight.

His eyebrows knitted in confusion. "What's it doing?"

"It wanted the sunlight. Freedom. That's all," I said plainly.

"But it can't . . ."

I didn't want to say the next line. Every time I heard it on the show, I felt sick to my stomach, especially with the way Rose had spat it. Gut heavy with guilt, I locked eyes with The Doctor. "It couldn't kill Van Statten. It couldn't kill me. It's changing. What about you, Doctor? What are you changing into?"

The Doctor's arms went limp; the gun no longer pointed at me and the Dalek but at the floor. He looked so sad and lost. "I couldn't . . . I wasn't . . . Oh, Dahlia . . . they're all dead," he choked out.

"Why do we survive?" the Dalek wheezed.

The Doctor shook his head. "I don't know."

"I am the last of the Daleks."
The words were spoken too slowly. It was dying, even with my DNA helping it regenerate.

The Doctor managed a pathetic chuckle. "You're not even that. Dahlia did more than regenerate you. You absorbed her DNA. You're mutating."

"Into what?"

"Something new," The Doctor replied. "I'm sorry."

"I can feel. So many ideas. So much darkness . . . Dahlia . . . give me orders! Order me to die. I shall not be like you. Order my destruction! Obey! Obey! Obey!" the Dalek screamed, glaring at me with its single gleaming eye.

I swallowed a glue-like wad of spit and looked at the Dalek. My pulse pounded in my ears. I was going to do it. Granted, it wanted to die, but that wasn't the point.

Before I could change my mind, I nodded rapidly.

"Are you frightened, Dahlia?"

"Yes," I whispered.

"So am I," it rumbled back. "Exterminate."

I moved away from the Dalek while it replaced the metal armor surrounding its body. The entire Dalek hovered in the air several feet; the metal spheres disconnected from the body and formed a perfect circle around the Dalek. After glowing brightly for several seconds, the Dalek exploded. Any other evidence vanished into thin air.

Feeling numb and empty, I turned away from the scene of the Dalek's death and walked past The Doctor with my eyes to the floor. There was nothing to say.

The Doctor was silent on our trek back to the TARDIS. Behind us, Adam tried to keep up. He was going on about the place being filled with concrete like we didn't know.

I wish the pest would drop dead.

When we approached the TARDIS, I paused at the doors and spun on my heel to face the two following males. The Doctor stopped a foot from me; Adam stumbled in a few feet after him.

I barely spared either of them a glance. "He's not coming with us. Get rid of him," I ordered stonily, entering the TARDIS right after and slamming the door behind me.

I made my way through the hallways to my room. The door wasn't locked this time.

I took off my jacket and neatly folded it over the back of my desk chair. I slipped off my shoes without unlacing them. Silently, I settled on my bed with my hands resting on my stomach. My fingers were laced together. I waited for The Doctor.

I didn't have to wait long. Not five minutes later I could hear his footsteps making their way to my door. He stopped uncertainly at my door. He knocked and murmured, "Dahlia?"

"Yes, Doctor?" I sighed heavily.
"May I come in?"

I closed my eyes. "I suppose so."

The door creaked open and The Doctor stepped nervously into my room. I could tell he was observing everything. He was rarely allowed in here; I preferred my privacy.

"Dahlia?" he asked again, quieter than before.

I opened my eyes a sliver. "I'm not asleep. Just waiting for you to start talking."

"You're angry," The Doctor stated sadly.

I sighed again. "Not angry, just tired, upset . . . probably disappointed."

After a few moments of silence, The Doctor said, "I'm sorry."

"I know."

"No, you don't. If I had just listened to you, then we could've left, and those people wouldn't have died. The Dalek would've eventually died on its own. If I had given you a chance to explain . . . if I just listened for once in my damn life . . ."

"Doctor, is this going to happen again?" I asked suddenly, interrupting his self-deprecating tirade.

"What?" He frowned.

"Is this going to happen again? This whole you not trusting me and getting pissed off even though we've gone over this twice. I'm sick of arguing with you over the same thing. If you need someone else, someone who doesn't know the future, let me know, and we'll find her, and then I'll be on my merry way." I watched him collapse into a chair. My words had obviously stung him, but I wouldn't allow myself to feel guilty. We needed to settled this now or suffer the consequences later.

"I don't need someone else, nor do I want someone to take your place," The Doctor finally said. "I want you, here, with me, traveling through all of time and space."

"Is that really what you want? Because next time you don't listen to me, I'm going to knock you unconscious."

"Yes. I don't want anyone else, Dahlia, only you. Please understand that I don't mean to get angry when you can't explain something. I know you have responsibilities."

I opened my eyes fully and stared at him. "Doctor, if this is going to work out, you have to trust me. No other way will work."

"I trust you," he said without hesitation. "It's me I don't trust."

Shoving myself into a sitting position, I crossed my legs and gave him a soft smile. "Doctor, all you have to do is act the way you normally would. No sudden tricks or new ways of thinking. Just you and your Time Lord brain."

He grinned at me. "Right. So . . . are we good? Everything all right now? I'll listen to you and you won't leave me with some naïve twat some random day?"

I laughed. "No, Doctor, I won't be running off any time soon. Promise."
"So," I asked when we landed, "where are we now?"

The Doctor grinned in answer and strolled to the doors. He leaned against them and crossed his arms. "Guess," he challenged, smirking.

Facing The Doctor, I braced my hands on the console and leaned against it. I pretended to think. "Is it a space station floating above Earth in the distant future of the Great and Bountiful Human Empire?"

He chuckled. "Nope, but good guess, maybe we'll go there next." He spun around and flung open the doors. "No, this is the planet Tron! Not to be confused with the syfy movie Tron—at least not for a few hundred years—forty percent jungle, sixty percent water, eighteen percent swamp and home to the hoosliv species."

I frowned as I did the math. **118 percent? So much for Time Lord intelligence.**

Peeling my jacket off, I left it hanging over the railing. The air rolling inside the TARDIS through the doors was almost too humid for my pale blue halter top, let alone a jacket. I didn't see how The Doctor could survive the heat.

*Maybe it's a Time Lord thing . . .*

The Doctor intertwined his fingers with mine when I got to his side. He led me outside and I gasped in surprise.

We were surrounded by a jungle in the richest shades of green. A blue, actually blue, waterfall fell into a lagoon nearly thirty feet in front of us. Multi-colored flowers hung from thin, coiled orange vines. A deep breath rewarded me with one of the sweetest scents in existence.

"Doctor . . ." I whispered in shock. I didn't know what I expected but this wasn't it.

His thumb stroked the back of my hand. The Doctor pulled me closer to his side and leaned down, nuzzling my cheek.

The setting, how he was acting . . . it was like a scene from a romance novel. I was even reacting like the swooning girl described in their pages. Shortness of breath, pounding heart, fluttering eyelashes, blushing cheeks, heat coiling in my pelvis, weak knees . . . the list went on and on. Thing was, I wasn't too upset about it.

The Doctor gave me an Eskimo kiss. His eyes were closed, and he was smiling gently. This was the most peaceful I had ever seen him.

I could feel his breath on my lips and smell his scent of leather, cinnamon, and honey. He was close enough to kiss.

Every nerve ending was electrified. My arousal was becoming painful.

*What's going on? Why are we here? Is that all he's going to do? Is he waiting for me to give some sort of signal?*

"Bet you're wonderin' what I'm gonna do next," The Doctor mumbled clearly.
I swallowed nervously. "Maybe. Are you reading my mind?"

The Doctor chuckled. His eyes slit open to leer at me. "No, but I can tell. You're nervous. Don't be. I won't do anythin' you don't want me to." He paused to think. "Well, other than what I'm gonna do next."

I chewed on my bottom lip. "And what're you gonna do?"

He grinned. "This." And then he kissed me.

Though the reality of The Doctor kissing me still left me as dazed as the first time it happened, I made sure to respond this time.

It was a closed mouth kiss. Neither of us felt the need to use our tongues. (That's bullshit. But I think it would be rude of me to shove my tongue down his throat during our second kiss.) The kiss was fierce and languid at the same time, both of us using as much passion as the other but not attempting to dominate or overpower. This wasn't a battle of egos; it was a dance between equals.

My free arm wrapped around The Doctor's neck to lower him to my level even though I was standing on my toes. His free hand was cupping my jaw, ever so slightly tilting my head for a better angle to slant his mouth against mine.

The Doctor didn't nip my lips with his teeth this time. I nipped at his before he got a chance. I felt his shiver of pleasure when I did it.

I thought about using tongue, but I was forced to break away for air instead.

The Doctor kissed my cheek, rumbling in my ear, "Thought that was the perfect moment to cash in my second bribe."

The Doctor and I sat by the lagoon, occasionally dipping our fingers in the water. We hadn't discussed the kiss or The Doctor's excuse of using his second bribe. I wasn't sure I believed him on that. We were still holding hands.

"Doctor," I started, "why did you bring me here?"

He sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. "As an apology, for how much of an arse I've been to you, and I'm not just talkin' 'bout what happened with Van Statten. I mean all of it."

I smiled to myself.

He huffed. "Soooooo . . . you enjoyin' yourself so far?"

I smirked at him. "Oh yeah. I especially liked the part right after we got out of the TARDIS."

"Really?" He smirked back. "I hadn't noticed."

"There were no clues?"

The Doctor leaned toward me with a playful grin and gleaming eyes. "There might've been. I was too busy payin' attention to the blushing and fluttering eyelashes and little sounds you were makin'."
My cheeks heated up. I hadn't realized I had been making sounds.

"Nice to know you enjoyed it," The Doctor commented, leaning closer.

Despite the burning of my cheeks, I managed to give him a coy smile. "Bet it did wonders for your ego."

He hummed approvingly. We were in the perfect position to kiss again and my stomach lurched in anticipation. "That among other things," The Doctor muttered.

War drums sounded from the surrounding forest. A resonating shriek peeled through the air and sent a shock of cold fear to my gut. The Doctor and I jerked apart and faced the direction the scream had come from.

"Doctor," I whispered, huddling close to him.

He pressed his lips into a thin line. Squeezing my hand, he said, "I won't let it hurt you."

My fear was soothed, if only by a bit. While I didn't enjoy using The Doctor as a shield or a crutch, knowing that he would be there to help if I was in trouble was comforting.

The drums continued their pounding as they closed in on our position. The shrubbery and leaves on the trees rustled noisily. If I tilted my head the right way, I could hear the thud of heavy footsteps.

My eyes caught the shimmer of black eyes. An alien stalked out of the foliage. A large spear was clutched in one of its hands. Others of the same species of alien emerged from the forest; most handled the same type of spear as the first, but others had bows and arrows and smaller knives. The war drums thundered on, hidden somewhere amongst the trees.

With a wave of one of its four hands, the first alien silenced the drummers. It stared at The Doctor and me impassively.

"You will come with us," it said.

"They're the hoosliv," The Doctor muttered to me as we were escorted through the jungle by the aliens.

Hoosliv were all around eight feet tall, varying shades of dark green, and all had black eyes with nearly invisible green irises. Each one was muscled in a lean way with backwards knees and four arms. I suspected they were all male, but Koschei was quick to shoot that theory down.

*The warriors of the hoosliv are genderless. They're like that from birth and have all the strengths of both sexes but the weakness of neither.* He'd informed me.

*Fantastic,* I thought sarcastically.

The trees finally began to thin out and we were soon walking down a well trekked road out of the forest and entering a city built out of grey wood. Hooslivs strolled around, men and women, going about their business but they stopped to stare at our procession making its way through the streets.

The warriors led The Doctor and me to the palace at the center of the city. The large, heavy doors swung open, and we were greeted by a large and extravagantly decorated throne room. We walked
until stopping several feet from the colossal throne where a hoosliv (male, from what I could tell) sat.

"Kneel before King Kraith!" the lead warrior ordered us, forcing The Doctor and me to our knees and bowing our heads for us.

I could feel King Kraith's glare. "What are these strangers doing in my palace?"

"They were found trespassing, sire."

I gulped. Somehow, I didn't think Kraith would be lenient in punishing us. We needed a plan. A glance at The Doctor told me he didn't have one. Maybe I could think of one?

"Kill them," King Kraith ordered leisurely.

Panicking, I sneered at The Doctor and spat out the first thing I could. "Oh, you stupid man!"

Everyone's attention snapped to me. The Doctor gaped at me in horror. Eyes wide and pleading with him to play along, I snapped at him, "This is what I get for not listening to my mother! She said 'Don't go off with him! All he'll do is get you into trouble!' But I said no and went with you anyway, now look where we are!"

The Doctor seemed to catch on. He bared his teeth and growled, "Oh, shut it, woman! Like I wanted you to come along with all your naggin'!"

"Don't you dare turn this on me!" I snarled back. "Every time! This happens every time we go somewhere! For once, can't you just take responsibility—"

"Enough!" Kraith shouted, standing from his throne.

The Doctor and I cringed but made sure not to drop our pissed off attitudes.

"What is the meaning of your sudden fury, woman?" Kraith demanded, narrowing his eyes at me.

I summoned all of my ire and spat, "My husband. We haven't been married for a year and all he does is get us into trouble!"

The Doctor rolled his eyes. "Oh, here we go again with the ranting."

"Shut up!" I hissed furiously.

King Kraith ordered thunderously, "Quiet."

We stopped arguing and faced the king. Kraith observed me silently.

"You wish to not be . . . attached to this man anymore?" he asked me, leaning forward and bracing his arms on his legs.

Scowling, I nodded.

"Would you adhere to marrying me instead?"

I gaped. What? I mean . . . what the hell? Did aliens just ask that? Did they really just ask random people to marry them? Then again, he was the king. He probably believed he had the right to do whatever he wanted.
"Pardon me, but are you serious?" I asked incredulously.

King Kraith settled back in his throne. For a second, I thought I had secured both mine and The Doctor's death by insulting the only person who could pardon us. Then, the king nodded.

"I am serious," he responded smoothly. "My last queen is recently deceased, and I have not yet chosen her successor. Now I can call off the search."

I thought about it for a moment. If I agreed to marry King Kraith, he'd let The Doctor go, and then I'd be rescued within minutes.

Raising my head, I put on my most charming smile and looked King Kraith in the eye. "I'll marry you."

To my right, The Doctor went rigid. Hopefully, he'd run back to the TARDIS. The sooner we left this planet the better.

Kraith grinned victoriously. "Excellent. I'll show you to your rooms." He stood. "Guards, kill the man."

"What? No!" I shouted in panic. They were supposed to let him go!

Every living being in the throne room stared at me suspiciously. King Kraith's glare was especially venomous.

"Why not? He is of no use to anyone here."

I forced myself to relax. Putting on an air of aloofness and irritation, I easily lied, "Unfortunately, he is. See, our race is mildly telepathic, and upon marriage, our minds are bonded together. To put it simply, if you kill him, you kill me."

Kraith frowned. "Is there a way to reverse this? I will not marry a bound woman."

A thinly veiled threat laced his tone.

I scoffed, "Of course there is. The only problem is that it's a long process, but that's all right since it'll give you time to prepare the grounds for the wedding ceremony."

Kraith seemed less suspicious, but he continued to ask questions. "Why would the preparation take so long?"

"Weddings on our home world are a rare feature. When one is arranged, it's a town wide event. There's also the problem with the energy of the city." I was so thankful I had a wild imagination. Without it, we'd be dead right now.

"Energy of the city?"

I wrinkled my nose, as if smelling something bad. "Yes. Your guards patrol every street, blocking the flow of energy in and out of the city. It's messing with my psychic field."

The Doctor was scowling openly at me. No doubt he thought no plan was better than my plan.

"Why is this important?" Kraith asked.

Feeling emboldened, I stood. "It's important because the interference isn't allowing my abilities to work at their full potential. Without the full flow, it could take months to sever the mental
connection with my . . . spouse." I sneered the last word distastefully.

Again, Kraith thought for several long moments. He then nodded. "Follow me, future queen. Guards, bring him."

The Doctor was hauled to his feet by the guards. He didn't look at me, keeping his glare stuck on the floor. King Kraith offered me his lowest arm. I took it with only a second's hesitation; his green skin looked odd again my pale flesh. Soon we were gliding up a set of stairs at the far-left side of the throne room and through several wide corridors.

"While we walk, explain the separation process to me," Kraith subtly ordered.

I didn't hesitate to speak this time. I had pieced together the parts of my (at first) sketchy plan. The Doctor and I could escape, and King Kraith would unwittingly help us do so.

"First, my spouse and I will need to be locked in a room together," I explained coldly. "Only the guards will be allowed to bring us food, clothing, and other necessities."

Kraith's response was immediate. "Why?"

"Being trapped together is a sort of punishment and it, along with being tended to by the genderless, removes distractions, interferences, or temptations while the couple separates themselves from one another." Deciding Kraith needed a bit more convincing that I really did want to marry him; I stroked his arm and smiled coyly up at him when I mentioned temptations.

It did the trick. Kraith returned the smirk and relaxed, pulling me closer to him.

"Second, the separation process will take at least two weeks. Any unexpected visits from anyone other than the guards will add between three days to a week of more time." I paused to scrunch my face in annoyance. King Kraith smelt like mold and wet rust. "Sorry, but I can't explain the correlation between outsiders and the separation more clearly. I'm not an expert in the study of psychic links."

My apology was waved off. "Do not apologize. As long as the separation is completed, I don't care to know the logistics."

I slumped in relief. Thank God, I didn't have to bullshit my way through that minefield.

Clearing my throat, I continued, "Third, I'll need a map of the city, so I can reorganize the guards."

"How will they be reorganized?"

I stroked his arm soothingly. "I'll just need to open four streets until the separation is complete. Everything will go back to normal afterwards."

Kraith nodded. "Then I shall have one of the guards deliver a map as soon as possible. Is there anything else I need to know?"

Sighing heavily, I spare a glance back at The Doctor. He still wasn't looking at me. He didn't even glance up when I called out mentally. Hopefully he wasn't too upset with my plan.

"I suppose I should tell you that my husband cannot be mistreated during the separation. Our comforts must be equal," I added with put-upon tiredness. "The more comfortable we are, the easier the separation will be."
Kraith hummed. "Yes . . . we haven't discussed your husband. Won't he resist the separation? Once you are free of him, he will be executed."

I smirked confidently despite the roiling of fear and disgust in my gut. "He can try, but I'm much more talented in matters of the mind than he is."

If possible, Kraith seemed even more pleased than he had been. I guess I was a better liar than I thought I was.

Our party finally stopped in front of a large pair of ornate double doors.

"This is where you and your spouse will be staying. Normally the future queen would be placed closer to my rooms but, seeing as I must resist the temptation of visiting you, you'll be placed in the most secluded wing of the palace. Few need to pass through these parts, and only the guards and I shall know which room you two reside in," Kraith told me. He lightly shoved the doors open with his main set of arms.

The room was spacious enough to fit two living rooms inside. Half the room's interior was comprised of expertly crafted wooden furniture accented with shimmering glass or precious metals. Colorful silks draped from the walls and crisscrossed the ceiling, sometimes draped from it. The other half held a king-sized bed that hung from the ceiling with thick, coiled vines.

Kraith motioned to the two doors spaced from the suspended bed. "One is a wardrobe. Clothes will be dropped off, along with food and a map, as soon as I can arrange it. The other is a bathing room." He stepped away from the double doors. My arm was released from the crook of his elbow.

Blinking his slanted eyes, the king bowed deeply to me. "I shall leave you to your work, my queen-to-be."

I felt silly bowing back. "Thank you, my lord. Hopefully this process will be quick." Then I strolled as gracefully as possible into the guest room.

The Doctor stumbled in after me (most likely pushed), and the doors were closed.

Sagging in exhaustion after the door locked, I hurried over to The Doctor to look him over for any wounds. I hadn't seen the guards injure him, but King Kraith and I had walked in front of them the entire time through the hallways. I had gotten us this far; I wasn't about to start taking chances.

"Doctor, are you alright?" I asked, lightly running my fingers over his arms and chest. He flinched away from my touch. "Did they hurt you?"

"I'm fine," he answered coldly. The Doctor shifted away from me and crossed his arms over his chest defensively.

Hurt stung in my chest. My arms fell to my sides.

"So," he sneered, "does your 'plan' go beyond not dying into, you know, escaping?"

At his mocking tone my hackles raised. Standing tall, I shared The Doctor down and spit out a firm yes. He motioned for me to go on.

Scowling, I obliged. "Once I get a map, I'll clear the guards from four streets. After that, all that's left is to get out of this room and onto one of the streets and then we're out."

He raised an eyebrow. "That's it? How are we goin' to get outta this room? We're locked in."
I rolled my eyes. "There's more than one way out of here, Doctor." I pointed to a pair of orange curtains in the living room half of the guest room.

The Doctor blinked dumbly, mumbling, "Ah." He'd finally noticed the sliver of light filtering through the closed fabric.

I walked over to the curtains and wrenched them apart. And frowned. The window didn't go to the floor like I expected but it was big enough for both The Doctor and me to fit through and not too far off the ground. The only problem was finding a place to tie off whatever we used as a makeshift rope. Most of the furniture was too light to hold my weight, let alone The Doctor's. But that could wait. For now, those silks decorating the room were looking very useful right now.

"How far down do you think the drop is?" I asked The Doctor, stripping one of the silks from the wall to measure it.

"From one hundred seventy-six feet to one hundred eighty-three," he noted offhandedly. He was leaning halfway out the window to observe the city.

"Fourteen feet," I mumbled to myself, twisting the pale green silk between my hands to test its strength. The cloth wasn't actually silk; it wasn't smooth enough, but it was the only word I could find for the fabric.

"We'll need at least fourteen to get to the ground safely," The Doctor tossed out. He took the cloth from me, caressing it with his calloused hands. "Hurnyl—strong, not too slippery, lightweight, many purposes. Not my first choice as impromptu rope but it'll have to do."

The room had gotten darker. I looked out the window to see the sun setting. How was that possible? A short while ago the sun was high in the sky.

The Doctor noticed my confusion. "Days here go by twice as fast as they do on Earth."

So that's what it was. Guess that wasn't weird, in retrospect. Planets having different orbits and all. Only natural that some have longer days and others have shorter . . . Wait . . . did he say twice as fast? Meaning one of their days is half the length of one of Earth's?

"Fuck my life," I growled, gritting my teeth so hard they creaked. "I thought we had more time than that."

The Doctor snorted. "Well, we don't, so what do we do?"

I sighed and squeezed the bridge of my nose. The sun had nearly set, and it seemed like King Kraith wasn't sending any guards to visit us tonight. There wasn't anything we could do. Except sleep.

"Let's just get some rest," I muttered. "God knows we both need it after today." I shuffled over to the closet, hoping there were at least some night clothes stuffed in there.

I was lucky. Though they seemed outdated, there were several variations or clothing stuffed in the closet.

As tempted as I was to take an old shirt and pants, an impish part of my mind chose a short, flimsy night gown. I swiftly hid my find in my arms by bundling it up as tightly as possible against my chest.

"Do you want the bathroom first?" A brief fantasy of The Doctor suggesting we wash at the same
time flitted into my mind before I could shove it away.

The Doctor grumbled. "Sure." He shrugged out of his leather jacket and laid it across a chair, slipping his boots and socks off as well.

I expected him to rummage through the closet for clothing to sleep in, but The Doctor merely passed it and continued to the bathroom. Running water sounded from the bathroom seconds later.

*I wonder if he'll be in there long enough for me to burn off some frustration.* My hand toyed along the waistband of my pants. It wouldn't take long for me to get off; The Doctor had me worked up and horny already. All I needed was a few select touches . . .

The water shut off. I could hear splashes that signaled The Doctor was climbing into the tub.

*Five minutes, five minutes is all I need,* I thought desperately. Giving into temptation, I hurriedly clambered onto the bed, settling on my stomach. Undoing my button and zipper, I shoved my hand into my pants until it connected with my wet folds. I hissed at the contact. I was almost too sensitive, but I could work with this.

Slowly, I used a finger to circle my clit. A breathy whimper escaped me at the touch. I wouldn't even need my other hand; I could get off on these small touches alone.

I worked my clit faster. My hips jerked against the mattress in time with my fingers. My breath came out in soft pants. Heat and arousal were quickly pooling in my lower abdomen. Twinges of pleasure made my legs straighten to points. God, I was *so close.*

Pleasure pulsed through my entire body when I orgasmed.

I basked in the afterglow of my orgasm. I could've fallen asleep in that position—I already felt drowsy—but fabric rustling interrupted my daze.

*Shit. I forgot he was there.* I quickly redid my pants and maneuvered into a casual position. Masturbating to a fantasy of my nine-hundred-year-old alien friend? Me? I would *never.*

The bathroom door creaked open, and steam rolled into the room.

Pretending to not be the least bit guilty or ashamed wasn't as easy as I had hoped it would be. Swallowing thickly, I looked over to the now open door. In another attempt at casualness, I said airily, "Wow, you weren't in there for an hour? I'm amazed." I got the words out just in time, because as soon as I caught sight of The Doctor, I choked on my own spit.

He was wearing nothing but a pair of black, slim fitting boxer shorts. I could still see the moisture slicking his body from his bath. I couldn't rip my stare away from his muscles as they moved under his skin every time he made the smallest move.

*God, I pleaded, I'm not sure if this is a punishment or a reward, so I'm not sure if I should thank you or scream as many obscenities at you as I possibly can. Please don't hold that against me. I could practically hear the disembodied laugh.*

Oh wait, that was real. Koschei was letting out this wheezy sort of cackle in the back of my mind.

"Well, some of us don't like to turn ourselves into prunes."

What? Oh, The Doctor was talking. *Okay . . . stop ogling him! . . . He's gonna notice! . . .*
Seriously, stop . . . like right now . . . oh, forget it . . .

Can anyone really blame me for staring? The only time I'd seen this regeneration anywhere near this level of undress was in the episode Dalek, and even then, he was being tortured. Kinda hard to appreciate the view when the one you're drooling over is screaming in pain.

If I thought he was sexy then, he looked like a god now.

"I'm hoping you didn't use all the hot water, though I might take a cold one with how humid this planet is." I was glad The Doctor was toweling his head off. He was so busy with the task that he wasn't paying me any mind.

"Mmhm," he acknowledged, moving toward one of the couches.

Was he still angry? What did he have to be angry about anyway? My plan might be a little unorthodox, but his plans were never exactly foolproof either. They were his plans after all.

Deal with The Doctor's mood swings later. First—a bath.

The bathroom was still covered in a fine sheen of moisture from The Doctor's bath, but the hot tub sized in-ground tub was completely drained. Several extra-large towels were stacked on a wicker shelf on the farthest side of the room, only slightly rumpled from The Doctor's rummaging.

I twisted the faucet on, testing the water to make sure it was to my liking. To keep the now wrinkled nightgown from getting wet, I placed it beside the towels and got undressed, folding my clothes neatly and placing them on a shelf above where The Doctor had placed his own clothing.

Turns out a hot bath was what I needed. While I still felt slightly guilty over using The Doctor as substance for my fantasies, the shame was gone. Now that my head was clear, I really didn't have a reason to be ashamed, did I? I mean, with all the companions The Doctor has had, most of them had some sort of romantic or sexual feelings for him. They probably did the exact same thing I did. Besides, it's innocent. Nothing will come of it. It's just a way of relieving tension so I don't jump The Doctor and make a fool out of myself.

Having thoroughly explained my actions to myself, I finally relaxed in the nearly scalding water.

I was having second thoughts about the nightgown. I could just tell him to toss in a shirt and pants. He'd believe me if I told him this has a hole in it, I thought, biting my lip. No, I resolved, tugging the dainty thing over my head. I am not a coward.

I kept a towel on my head to both dry my hair and give me something to fiddle with. The oversized towels were too large to stay on my head properly, so it was a viable excuse.

Thankfully, The Doctor wasn't in my direct field of vision when I left the bathroom. He was doing something over by the couches.

What the—? "Doctor," I frowned, "what're you doing?"

He had pulled one of the covers off the bed and over to a couch. He seemed to have arranged it and some pillows into a makeshift bed.

"I guessed I would be sleepin' over here," he snorted. "Unless you were plannin' on takin' the
My cheeks heated up, but I fought down the blush. "I thought we were going to share the bed. It's big enough for more than four people so there's plenty of room."

The Doctor stopped what he was doing. "Are you sure?" he asked tentatively.

I shrugged even though he couldn't see. "Sure, as long as you don't, you know, kick me off the bed or steal the covers."

He snorted and looked over his shoulder at me. I was sure I saw his eyes roam over my body. "I'm fine with it—as long as you don't grope people in your sleep."

I nearly snapped at him, but then I saw the glint in his eye. The bastard was teasing me. Smirking, I shot back, "Like you wouldn't enjoy it if I did."

Watching The Doctor's cheeks turn a deep shade of pink gave me an empowering sense of victory.

I tossed the towel away. My hair was still wet, but the towel wasn't helping anymore. No point in bothering myself to hold onto it.

The Doctor rolled his eyes. "Slob."

"Oh please," I snorted and crawled onto the bed. It swung gently back and forth with the disturbance. "Like you're any better. I've seen you completely trash rooms while looking for a pencil."

The Doctor just muttered under his breath.

"Well, you can join me if you want to," I yawned. "I promise not to violate you in your sleep."

The Doctor huffed, "Seems I don't have a choice." He walked back to the bed, carrying a lantern I hadn't noticed and set it on the bedside table.

He carefully climbed onto the bed beside me, but his movements still rocked us back and forth.

"Swing beds, why'd it have to be swinging beds?" The Doctor grumbled. "Damn things're almost as bad as water beds."

I giggled at his frustrated shifting. The Doctor kept tossing and turning because he couldn't get comfortable while the bed was moving, and the bed kept swinging because he wouldn't stop shifting.

After the hundredth shift, my amusement ran out. Sighing, I flipped over to face The Doctor. His back was to me, and he was still squirming uncomfortably.

I reached out and laid a hand flat across his bare shoulder. My stomach lurched pleasantly at the contact. He was so warm. I just wanted to cuddle up to him, but I didn't. That would probably make everything even more awkward between us with the recent kiss and his annoyance over my plan . . .

"Just keep still," I whispered to him. He had frozen when I placed my hand on his shoulder; I didn't know if he was just shocked that I had touched him, or he was just following my order.

The room was enveloped in silence. The only sounds were the foreign animals outside, the creaking of the woven vines holding the bed up, and our breathing. When the bed finally stopped
moving, I cautiously leaned over The Doctor. He seemed to stop breathing while I reached over to
his sonic screwdriver lying beside the lantern. I drowsily flipped it to the correct setting and
pointed it to the lit lantern.

"Do you want this on?" I murmured to The Doctor. I was tempted to fall asleep right where I was,
draped over his half naked form with my breasts sandwiched against his comfortably warm side.

"No," he replied just as quietly.

"Mmkay," I said, using the sonic to extinguish the flame. The sonic was placed back on the table
and I scooched back over to my (cold) side of the bed. "G'night, Doctor."

"Goodnight, Dahlia."

The next morning found me sprawled out on my stomach in the center of the bed, clutching an
immense pillow to me. A cozy weight rested around the small of my back. Sunbeams managed to
nail me right in the eyes, causing me to squirm against my pillow and bury my face in its smooth,
feverish surface.

Smooth? My sleep-addled brain fought to discover the problem. Pillows weren't smooth... and
they weren't warm or... breathing...

Groaning in frustration, I huffed and pouted. I didn't want to open my eyes and investigate. I just
wanted to sleep. It had been so long since I'd gotten that good of a night's rest. There hadn't been
any nightmares; not one whiff of blood or ash, not a single scream of terror or exterminate. Oh
yeah, last night had been the best sleep I'd gotten in months.

Finally deciding I'd procrastinated enough, I slowly blinked my eyes open. Blurry images took a
few seconds to settle and clear but ultimately revealed their secrets.

Well, I thought slowly, barely managing to process the new information, that was not entirely
unexpected.

So, you normally cuddle random people in your sleep? That definitely doesn't scream clingy,
Koschei snickered.

I groaned. Go away, Koschei, it's too early for me to deal with your shit. Call back in a few hours.
You know, when I'm not using The Doctor as an oversized body pillow.

The Time Lord ghost-imprint-afterimage-thing chuckled lowly in my ear one more time before
leaving me in peace.

Really though, Dahlia, you should've known this would happen, I thought, collapsing back onto
The Doctor's well-toned chest. It was true. I did have a tendency to curl up with anything and
everyone I ever shared a bed with. I had no idea why, it just happened. Now I was splayed out on
top of my very attractive, almost naked Time Lord friend who I definitely had more-than-crush-
but-not-yet-love feelings for. Great. What a perfect way to start a day. Not to mention said Time
Lord had an arm securely around my waist, keeping me in place on top of him.

With all the thinking I had done my mind was now almost fully awake. And with that awareness
came embarrassment, blushing, and the worst, arousal.
My cheeks burned as my groin throbbed pleasantly. What the hell was wrong with me? Couldn't I control myself for once? Was there some sort of weird aphrodisiac in this planet's air that The Doctor forgot to tell me about? As likely as that sounded, the most probable cause of my seemingly constant arousal was my own attraction to The Doctor.

Which was also why I needed to get as far away from him as possible before I did something we'd both regret.

I attempted to remove The Doctor's arms, but they wouldn't budge. I knew he was stronger than humans, but I hadn't thought he'd be this strong in his sleep. I tried poking him in the side; it was a crude technique but hey, it always seemed to work for other people. My luck seemed to be on the opposite side of the tracks today because all The Doctor did was mutter something unintelligible under his breath and stretch a few muscles.

*Maybe, I can . . .* I flattened my body out against his, inhaling sharply when my cheek rests against his clavicle. His mouth was so close . . . No! Need to escape before he wakes up or he'll ignore me the rest of the day.

I slowly loosened his tight grip around my waist. It wasn't loose enough for me to break, but I might be able to slip out from under it.

Squirming, I slid down his body. All was well for the first foot or so. Then I realized that something hard was pressing between my breasts. Heat flared in my cheeks and ears and down to my breasts while my mouth dried up.

*Oh God. OhGodOhGodOhGod . . . Oh. My. Fucking. God. The only way this could be more embarrassing is if The Doctor woke up right now,* I whimpered internally. In a flash of fear and panic, I snapped my eyes up to The Doctor's face. *Thank God, he's still asleep. I don't know what I would do if he woke up.*

*Start pleasuring him with your mouth?* Koschei purred.

My breath hitched and, if possible, my face turned a deeper shade of red. *I told you to leave.*

He laughed. *I know, but your floundering has gone from hilarious to pathetic. I thought I'd intervene and give you a little warning.*

*Warn me about what?*

I felt a presence loom over me and lean in close to breath in my ear. *If you don't scooch your ass up in about six seconds, he's going to roll over and you'll be trapped like this until he wakes up.*

I could feel Koschei's breath on my neck. With him being a sort of spirit entity, that should have worried me, but I had bigger problems.

I was in such a rush to return to my original position that I forgot to lift myself off The Doctor's erection. I just . . . kind of . . . slid my entire body up its length, and boy, did it have length.

I wanted to moan and grind my hips against his, just once, to feel it pressing against my burning hot center for a few seconds . . .

The Doctor groaned loudly and bucked his hips sharply against mine. I wasn't prepared for that. Goosebumps erupted on my skin from hearing such a delicious sound come from him of all people; a sharp cry burst from my throat as I bucked back.
His large hands grasped my waist, and I knew what was happening before it happened. The Doctor's hips pushed upwards and to the right, effectively rolling us and pinning me beneath him. I struggled under him, but it was a pointless endeavor.

*I am quite the situation you've gotten yourself into, Dahlia,* I chastised. I glanced at The Doctor. He was curled around my front, his arms around my waist. Puffs of breath caressed my skin where he pillowed his head against my breasts. At least he didn't snore.

All struggles ceased when I felt his erection twitch against my thigh. Heat pulsed between my legs in response. Struggling was apparently pointless. The Doctor's grip tightened whenever I attempted to get away. Might as well get comfortable.

Snuggling back into the fluffy covers and pillows, I ran my fingers through The Doctor's short hair. He sighed contentedly and nuzzled against my chest in response.

I wasn’t sure how long I laid there watching the sun rise and stroking The Doctor's hair, drifting in and out of sleep. By the sun's position, it was probably hours, but I didn't care enough to do the proper mental math.

The Doctor stirred gently, rubbing against me and groaning tiredly. His eyes twitched open and then immediately screwed shut again. "Damn alien suns . . . I'll need to fix that someday . . ." he muttered grouchily. He yawned before squinting up at me. "Oh, hello, Dahlia."

I smiled nervously and mumbled, "Morning, Doctor."

He frowned. "Somethin' wrong?"

"N-no! It's just . . ."

He tilted his head to better stare into my eyes. "Ya can tell me. Good listener, me!"

Swallowing thickly, I whispered, "D-Doctor, you're . . . um, lying on top of me."

Silence. He blinked dumbly for several seconds, taking that time to evaluate our extremely comfortable entanglement. (I was actually surprised by how I wasn't being crushed by his weight). Our situation seemed to dawn on him then. His cheeks flushed a deep pink and spread to his ears. The Doctor coughed awkwardly and removed his arms from my waist, taking his warmth with him.

"Sorry," he mumbled, averting his eyes to an empty spot on the bed. "I'll just . . . move, yeah?" The Doctor used his arms to lift his weight off me and tried to simply slide away from me. Unfortunately, this caused two problems: first, his (not fading) morning erection was still firmly pressed against my inner thigh. Two, his movement was causing my nightgown to slip lower and lower. Already part of the areola was showing.

Fuck my life.

The Doctor stumbled over his words, "Um, I, uh, I-I didn't mean— um, s-sorry, uh, uh, um, I'll just, um . . . yeah . . ." His blush was rivaling mine in terms of just how dark it could get. Poor man looked positively miserable.

Calmly as I could, I righted the garment. "Let me just . . ." I said quietly. Remorse weighing me down, I inched my legs away from The Doctor's length. I tried not to look at him, but my curiosity got the better of me. Shyly, I glanced at his expression from beneath my eyelashes.

The Doctor's eyes were fogged over with both restraint and obvious lust. He was breathing heavily
through his nose, occasionally licking his lips. Every muscle on his frame was tense, burning hot, and trembling. His hands were fist in the sheets of my sides; they seemed near the point of ripping the fabric. I was suddenly hit with just how stupid we were both being.

*My God... we're fucking morons.* I fought the urge to twist my face into an ugly scowl. The situation was fragile. I didn't want to discourage whatever The Doctor felt for me.

But holy fuck we were idiots. Our attraction to each other was obvious—why did we keep avoiding it?

No. Why did I keep avoiding it? That day in the kitchen... The Doctor had made the situation perfectly clear to me: it was my move. We might have been interrupted but there were tons of opportunities for me to snog him senseless. A few minutes of making out were all it would have taken, and I decided to do nothing.

Then he brought me here—an apology, he said, but all I had to do was read between the lines instead of waiting for him to do something. *Ugh! Why am I such a stupid ape?! He wouldn't ever make a move. He's afraid he'll frighten me away with all his burdens and Time Lordyness. And then he has the rule about not screwing companions.*

*Fuck that rule. Fuck ignoring whatever my feelings are. And fuck pretending like I don't want to spread my legs and beg him to fuck me until I can't walk.*

"Dahlia?" the Doctor's voice was so low I could barely hear him.

"Doctor." I smiled coyly, shifting my hips back to their original position against his hard on. I watched his Adam's apple bob when he swallowed. "I'm pretty comfortable. How 'bout you?"

The air wheezed out of his lungs in one long whoosh.

I pouted falsely. "Though, it could be better." Propping up on one arm, I trailed the free hand from his abdominals to his chest and then wrapped it around his neck. Trailing kisses up his neck, I paused at his ear, murmuring, "Breathe, Doctor. This is real."

He sucked in a gulp of air—only to release it seconds later in a soft groan. "Dahlia."

A thrill of gulp of air—only to release it seconds later in a soft groan. "Dahlia."

A thrill of pleasure caused my heart to stutter. Victory. This was happening. I moved forward to kiss him.

Echoing knocks thundered into the room. The Doctor and I stiffened. I squeezed my eyes shut and pleaded. *Please please please please please please please.*

"Future Queen, you must wake now," a genderless voice stated. "We have food and your requested map."

Any arousal drained from The Doctor's face at the words 'Future Queen'.

"You'd better answer," The Doctor said coldly. He pulled away from me and stomped into the bathroom.

I flopped back on the bed in defeat. Tears pricked at my eyes. The Doctor's tone had killed any lingering arousal. I had been so close. Now any progress made had been thrown out the window. The Doctor would pretend nothing happened.

Still wrapped in my despair, I trudged toward the door, making sure to put on a sleepy and non-
depressed front before I opened it. Two guards stood there, one with a bundle of papers and what seemed like charcoal sticks under an arm and the other keeping one hand on a food trolley covered in plates, covered dishes, and large pitchers of some sort of drink.

I managed to get out a short thank you while I pulled the cart inside the room. Taking the papers and charcoal from the other guard, I said, "If you'll excuse me, I must resume my work on the separation."

They were both walking away before I had even finished my sentence. *Well okay then.*

Pushing everything over to the couches, I spread the papers out on the table. Most were blank; I assumed they were for me to write down preparations for the 'wedding'. An investigation of the food left me both hungry and slightly disgusted. Little to nothing was recognizable, and whatever was recognizable gave off weird smells.

Shuddering, I thought, *I'll just wait for The Doctor to tell me what's safe and what isn't.* I unrolled the map to begin my search for four roads to mark. The palace, unsurprisingly, was in the middle of the map in all its massive glory. I immediately began to compare the buildings on the map to the ones I could see out the window. Several roads connected to the palace, all I needed was to find one that was under our window.

*Good God there are so many roads.* A headache was forming behind my eyes both from not eating and staring at the tiny lines of the map.

The bathroom door swung open. The Doctor strolled out, dressed in his clothes from yesterday. I abandoned the map in favor of getting changed into my clothes, as well.

The Doctor was eating some sort of red orange, nearly flat oval thing that I assumed was a fruit when I returned. Collapsing on the opposite couch, I hesitantly picked one up. "Um, Doctor," I said quietly, "this is all safe for me to eat, right?"

He gave me an odd look. "'Course it is. What made ya think it wasn't?"

Part of the awkwardness in the air disappeared. I blushed and gave him a self-conscious smile. "Sorry. Just not very familiar with alien foods."

Grinning hugely, The Doctor scooted forward on his couch until he could clearly point out random foods. "What I'm eatin' is called a flai. They're fruits that taste kind of like blackberries but have the texture of apples. This right here is fried eggs from the trolin bird, think of chicken eggs, with baked purple dhrun roots, think of potatoes or hash browns. And these are . . ." He went on and on, explaining what everything was to me. Some of them I decided to stay away from, like the extremely bitter mattven. Altogether, it was nice, just us eating breakfast together without the awkwardness.

After we finished eating the food cart was shoved over toward the door, and we settled in to stare at the map.

"So, can you tell which road is the one right under our window?" I asked The Doctor. We were seated side by side on one of the couches. He seemed to have a better understanding of the map than I did.

"Sure. It's this one right here." He placed his finger on said road.

I marked the street with a charcoal stick, doing the same to three others to make the map symmetrical. "Now we just need to wait until the guards come back to give it to them. Then we can
start on the rope. Hopefully they'll put this into effect immediately." I sighed. "We'll probably be here another day or so."

The Doctor stayed silent.

I spent the rest of the day making up the most ridiculous wedding preparations in existence to keep King Kraith busy. The guards came by again twice; the first time to collect the modified map and food cart and the second to drop off dinner.

This time I didn't grab a slinky nightgown to sleep in. Instead, I picked a baggy shirt and pants. The Doctor seemed to have the same idea, but his borrowed shirt fit much better than mine did.

Fiddling with my sleeves of my shirt, I bit my lip and glanced nervously over to The Doctor. He was sitting on a couch, inspecting the sonic.

"Doctor . . ." I wondered if it was a good idea to ask. Maybe I should just go to bed and hope he followed.

"Hm?" He didn't look up.

"Are you . . . are you coming to bed?" Only after the words were out of my mouth did I realize how much they made us seem like a married couple.

The Doctor had noticed it, too. He visibly tensed before sighing tiredly. "Dhalia . . . I think . . . I think it would be best if I stayed on the couch tonight."

I flinched at his words and slumped dejectedly. *Maybe I was wrong about him returning my feelings.* "Oh," I whispered. "O-okay." Swallowing thickly, I muttered, "Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

The next day was a mess of awkwardness. The Doctor and I tried to avoid each other as much as possible, but it was a ridiculous endeavor. We were locked in a room together. Where could we go?

The guards were the only break in our mundane day. They did the same thing they did yesterday—bring food and more paper and take the 'plans' I had written down.

"Do guards patrol around the palace?" I asked one when it handed me another scroll of parchment.

"Yes. Why do you ask?"

I frowned. "I've felt the patrols' energy signatures. It's been a bit of a distraction."

The guard stiffened. "We will not cease our patrols around the palace."

I shrugged nonchalantly. "I know. I can work around it. Thanks anyway."

Closing the door, I called out over my shoulder, "We need to time when the guards change shifts when they patrol around the palace. I'd rather not go through all this trouble just to get caught the
Our fourth day on the planet of Tron, The Doctor and I were both getting antsy. Being cooped in
the same room together, along with the weird tension and awkwardness, was getting to us. Our
temper were shorter and often the smallest thing ended in a screaming match. I didn't know how
much more my stress levels—and vocal chords—could take.

To make things even better, King Kraith decided to toss my warning out the window and visit me.

"Why don't you run off and find your fiancé?" The Doctor shouted.

I gritted my teeth. "Maybe I will! It'd be better than staying in here with you!"

Several loud knocks interrupted us.

The Doctor sneered. "Oh look! Maybe that's him now!"

"I can only hope," I growled, stomping toward the door. I expected another duo of guards and was
surprised to see the king standing there, looking all too pleased with the shouting match he had just
heard.

Gaping like a fish out of water, I floundered, "K-King Kraith! I-I didn't expect to see you for
another few days."

He puffed out his chest. "I understand that my visit will set your back another few days, but I
needed to see that your spouse had not attempted to kidnap you myself."

"The only thing he's done is start arguments. There's no reason for you to worry," I said coolly.

"It seems so." King Kraith tilted his head to the side, looking at me expectantly.

I didn't understand right away what he wanted me to do, but when he started leaning forward, I
knew.

_Mother of fu—he wants me to kiss him?! What do I do?! What do I do?!_ The king just kept getting
closer, the expectant look never leaving his face. _Suck it up, Dahlia. Do it or he'll get suspicious.
Kissing him once is better than dying._

Disgust firmly squashed, I stood on my toes until I could slant my mouth over the king's.

I nearly reeled back in revulsion. If I thought he smelt bad, his taste was even worse. His skin had a
dead, rubbery feel to it and tasted overpoweringly like bitter salt. My lungs were starting to ache
from holding my breath for so long, too. Sometimes I really hated my life.

Kraith finally pulled away, stroking my hair as he did so. He smiled. "I would apologize for adding
several more days to your confinement, but it seems that neither of us cares."

Morphing my face into what I hoped was a love-struck expression, I croaked out, "Yeah . . ."

Seeming content, Kraith released me and backed away from the door. "Until the day we wed,
future bride."

I closed the door with a soft click, and then rushed to the bathroom as fast as I could to desperately
washed my mouth out. How could one kiss make me feel so unclean? It felt like I had cheated on The Doctor, and we weren't even freakin' together!

Shit. The Doctor. He'd been in the perfect spot to see the entire thing. He had watched me voluntarily kiss King Kraith. Every time I try and take a step closer I get shoved fourteen back. Seriously. Just fuck my life into an early fucking grave.

Finally gathering enough courage to exit the bathroom, I made a B-line straight for the table with the extra fruit left over from our last meal. Unfortunately, the flai I bit into didn't do much to erase the taste of the hoosliv king's mouth from mine.

The Doctor hadn't said anything, but I had seen his expression. A deadly rage was boiling just beneath The Doctor's skin, and I had to be extra careful if I didn't want to set him off.

"You two seem to get along well," he spat bitterly. His glare threatened to burn two holes in my back.

I took a calming, wavering breath. "We did? Good. A lie is supposed to seem real."

"You should've told 'im no."

"And risk him getting suspicious? No thank you. I've kept up the act this long. I can keep it up until we escape."

"Oh, you still want to leave?" he shot back dryly.

Eyes narrowing into a glare, I spat, "Of course I do! The entire point of the plan is to keep suspicion down until we can escape."

The Doctor glared back. "Sure, you wouldn't be happier here with your dear King Kraith?"

"I'm just as miserable here as you are!"

"You seemed pretty comfortable snoggin' Kraith back there!"

My patience finally snapped. I didn't care if The Doctor and I were both confused about our feelings for the other. He didn't have the right to be an asshole for no reason.

Flinging the flai at the floor—it exploded into a colorful and sticky splatter upon impact—I shouted, "For God's sake, Doctor! That was one of the worst experiences of my life! There was no part of that kiss that I enjoyed! In fact, I still can't get the god-awful taste out of my mouth!" Rage and hurt were never a good combination.

The Doctor was still angry, but I could tell some of my yelling had gotten through to him. Relief was slowly unwinding his coiled muscles and replacing the anger with something foreign. My anger, however, only became more fueled when he started stalking toward me.

I didn't back away. He didn't seem to want to hurt me; he just looked determined.

The Doctor loomed over me, forcing me to crane my neck to look him in the eye. My face was still scrunched into a scowl, clearly upset and not wanting to deal with The Doctor's bipolar attitude anymore. The Doctor didn't seem to care because as soon as he was close enough he swooped down and captured my mouth with us, muffling my gasp of surprise.
This kiss wasn't like the last one we shared by the blue waterfall. We weren't equals. The Doctor was the claimer, and I was the claimed.

His mouth pressed harshly against mine; I could feel my teeth leave imprints on the inside of my lips. The Doctor bit my lips, rolling them between his teeth and then soothing the almost wounds with his tongue. He forced my mouth open, snaking his tongue inside to curl against mine and map my mouth. I was left dazed and jumbled by The Doctor's anomalous behavior, desperately trying to keep up and challenge him while he merely put me where he wanted me.

When I started going lightheaded from lack of air, The Doctor pulled away but not before sucking on my tongue for a good few seconds and then scraping his teeth along it.

Gasping for breath, I returned The Doctor's stare. His pupils were blown so wide they nearly obscured his icy eyes. He, too, was breathing deeply but not gasping like I was. Damn frog-skinned bastard, I thought sourly, but there was no venom in it.

"You're mine, Dahlia Tombew," The Doctor uttered lowly. "No one else is allowed to touch you like this. Don't you ever forget that, got it?"

I swallowed thickly. Part of me was affronted of The Doctor thinking he could own me. The other part was begging to let him show me just how much he owned me. I shoved both feelings away, believing it would be safer to just nod.

"Good," he murmured and stroked my hair. "And we're leavin' tonight. I've memorized the guards' schedules and know when their shifts change. We'll leave then."

I nodded again.

The Doctor smirked. "Now, let's see how long it takes to get that bad taste out of your mouth, hm?"

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After the guards collected the empty cart from the evening meal, The Doctor and I spent hours knotting hurynyl decorations together for our rope. Personally, I wasn't too crazy about using a homemade rope to escape with, but beggars couldn't be choosers.

I was also sure it wouldn't have taken as long as it had if The Doctor would've stopped caressing me at every opportunity and causing me to fumble the complicated Rublian knot I had been instructed to use.

We ended up stealing away when the glowing moon was still rising. The Doctor went down our rope first; he wanted to be sure of its strength. If it could hold him then it could hold me. From the safety of our room, I watched him descend.

A tiny blue light flashed from the darkness. He had made it.

Cautiously, I gripped the hurynyl and climbed out the window. Just don't look down. Easy. I've faced murderous Slitheen and Daleks. This is easy. The only problem was that my arms started trembling halfway down.

A fall from this height would kill me. I scowled at the thought that had come from nowhere. Thanks, Scumbag Brain.

I ignored my steadily panicking thoughts. Not thinking was infinitely better.
"That's it, Dahlia. Just a bit further," The Doctor shout-whispered.

Oh, thank God. If I could hear The Doctor, then I was almost back on solid ground. I scooched a few more feet down and felt arms grip my waist.

"Let go," The Doctor whispered.

Releasing the rope, I let The Doctor take my weight. He easily held me before placing me on the ground. The Doctor grinned widely and grabbed my hand. "Run," he whispered.

I beamed back and took off with him.

The street was empty of guards, as arranged, and a straight shot to the TARDIS (or so The Doctor said). We would be there soon; we were already past the edge of the city and near the woods.

I was struck by déjà vu while we dodged trees and other foliage, but this time there was no mental breakdown on the horizon.

An hour hadn't even passed before we were back inside the TARDIS, out of breath and grinning like maniacs. We both braced ourselves against the console while we caught out breath.

The Doctor only took a minute of rest before he was rushing around the console. Soon the TARDIS was roaring to life, and I was clutching the console to not be chucked against the railing. Goosebumps prickled all over my skin when the grinding sound of the TARDIS met my ears. I hadn't realized how much I had missed that sound until now.

"There. Floatin' safe and sound around the Crab Nebula," The Doctor proclaimed, entwining our fingers and leading me to the doors. He threw them open, allowing me to become enchanted by the splintered mass of green and orange, and curled the hand that used to encase mine around my waist.

I cuddled into The Doctor's side, sighing contently. "Hopefully this'll go better than your last attempt at being dashing."

"Should go better." He grinned. "Aren't any blokes here tryin' to steal you away from me."

Blushing, I bit my lip. We really needed to talk about that. "Doctor, we—" I was cut off by him tilting my face up and kissing me.

The kiss lasted for several seconds. Not even close to the bruising one The Doctor had planted on me several hours ago but still a good, long kiss.

Kissing The Doctor was a wonderful experience. It felt like coming home. His cinnamon and honey taste with that twang of aged parchment and ink always encased me, filling my head like vapors and leaving me lightheaded.

By the time we parted, I was drunk on his scent and aching for more of his taste. Was there a chemical in Time Lords' saliva humans were addicted to? If so, I didn't mind.

The Doctor continued to place several open-mouthed kisses on my mouth, pulling away when I tried to return them.

I eventually gave up and let him do what he wanted; I was enjoying it anyway.

In between kisses I managed to get out, "Doctor... we... need to... talk."
He made an acknowledging sound but didn't cease his ministrations.

I dodged his next kiss. He moved on to my neck. "We need to talk."

"About what?" he murmured against my throat.

Pulling him away from my skin to look him in the eye, I said, "You know what." And he did. I could see the nerves eating away at him. His pupils were blown wide in a way that made him look like an animal ready to bolt.

"I have an idea—let's go somewhere!" And like that the frightened Doctor was gone, replaced by the happy, never-bothered-by-anything Doctor.

I attempted to get him back on track. "No, Doctor. We don't need to go somewhere. We just got back!"

He ignored me. The Doctor rambled while he scrambled around the console in an effort to seemingly press every button and flick every switch. "Earth! How 'bout Earth? Haven't been to Earth in a while. Gotta check in every now and then or else it might explode."

The TARDIS slammed her doors shut. She was irritated with her thief. I could feel her annoyance in being taken to Earth just because The Doctor wanted to avoid talking about his feelings.

I was wrenched from my thoughts by a sudden flip the TARDIS executed. Shrieking in surprise and fright, I clutched the railing so I didn't go flying into the ceiling. Two seconds later I crashed back to the metal grating. A similar crash told me The Doctor had experienced the same antigravity situation I had.

I was still in shock when The Doctor threw open the TARDIS doors. My knees were trembling uncontrollably, and bile was creeping up my esophagus. That's it. The Doctor is no longer allowed to drive when he's emotionally unstable. I would suggest killing him, but I know you wouldn't approve, Koschei added.

I decided not to honor that with a response and stumbled out the doors after The Doctor.

The Doctor hadn't gone far. He had stopped a few feet outside the TARDIS and sat on a bench to stare blankly out at a bay in whatever city we were in of whatever country this happened to be.

Without saying a word, I sat next to him. I let the silence settle before I disturbed the peace. "Doctor, you know we can't ignore this."

He sighed heavily. "I know."

Biting my lip, I scrounged up the courage to asked, "What are we?"

"Honestly? I don't know."

"What do you want us to be? Because I know what I want."

"I can't . . . I can't tell you."

"Why not?"
"Because it's wrong for me to want anything from you!"

"What? Why?"

"Because I—Dahlia, I can't . . . I can't give you anything. I can't even ensure your safety, let alone your happiness. You deserve to be a queen, yet I can't give you that."

" . . . Doctor, I don't want to be a queen. I know you can't keep me safe, but you will tear apart the universe for me. And what can't you give me?"

"A stable life, a home, kids . . . Dahlia, I can't even tell you how I feel about you for Rassilon's sake!"

"First off—kids? I'm not ready for kids and won't be for a long time. Second, the TARDIS is my home now. Third, if I wanted a stable, domestic life, I wouldn't have come with you in the first place. I happen to like our crazy life. Lastly, I don't need for you to tell me, Doctor. Yeah, it would be nice to hear it but being shown how you feel would make me just as happy." I stared intently at him after I finished. "I'll ask again—what do you want us to be? We can see where this goes or call it off. Whatever you want."

The Doctor smiled sadly and covered my hand with his. I steeled myself. No matter what, I wouldn't cry.

"Dahlia." He stared into my eyes and said remorsefully, "I'm sorry, but I can't let you go that easily. I want us to at least give this a chance."

Happiness and relief hit me so hard I was frightened by my reaction.

I returned The Doctor's smile, though mine was exceedingly more cheerful, and this time . . . this time I kissed him.
The Chapter of Fail (aka the first sex scene i ever wrote)

Chapter Notes

This chapter takes place right after The Long Game. I didn't feel like writing the episode and how it changed at the original point of this chapter's publication, and that's how it's gonna stay.

The Doctor pinned me against a wall almost as soon as we returned to the TARDIS, lifting me off the floor to wrap my legs around his waist for balance. He kissed me fiercely; my lips stung from contact with his teeth.

"Stupid idea—ya could've been killed," he panted against my mouth, moaning softly when I rolled my hips into his.

I wrapped my arms around his neck to keep him from pulling away (like he had any plans to) and was kissing back just as intensely. "You do it all the time," I gasped back. “Besides, I had to set the timeline right. I did make you get rid of that idiot back at Van Statten’s, remember? He was supposed to cause a whole bunch of fuckery, but I had to improvise.”

The Doctor didn’t respond. He attempted to move down to my jaw and throat, but I whined when he started pulling away. Smirking, he kissed me again, this time parting my lips with his tongue and slipping it inside my mouth.

I moved one hand into his slightly too short hair to grip it as tightly as possible; sucking on The Doctor's tongue rewarded me with a more intense shot of his taste.

We went on like that for what felt like forever, swapping spit, intertwining our tongues, and mapping each other's mouths. Unsurprisingly, I ran out of air first, but I didn't allow The Doctor to attack my neck; I merely took a deep breath to satisfy my need for air and dove in to nip along his jaw. Dried sweat muffled his natural taste. I didn't care; I swiped my tongue along the curve of his jaw anyway.

The Doctor stiffened the closer I got to his ears, and his breathing became even more labored. So, naturally, that was where I went next.

Right when I scraped my teeth along his earlobe, The Doctor let out a long, drawn out moan. I paused. What the hell was that? Four's last words of advice to me floated to the surface of my mind: "Go for the ears". Was this what he meant? Of course, it was. What else could he have meant?

To test my hypothesis, I flicked The Doctor's earlobe with my tongue and sucked it into my mouth.

Another surprisingly loud, porn star worthy moan escaped The Doctor, this time accompanied by him grinding his erection against my core as hard as he could. The Doctor weaved his hand into my hair and pulled my mouth from his ear.

A hot flash of arousal shocked my lower abdomen at the animalistic lust in The Doctor's eyes. He leaned in close and nipped along my jaw. His hot breath came out in puffs against my ear when he
ordered, "Tighten your legs. 'M not takin' ya against a wall."

I blushed hotly. 'Take me'? Were we actually going to have sex this time? I had been trying to initiate that for months, but The Doctor had always managed to overpower his sex drive with remarkable self-control. I guess everyone had their breaking point, even The Doctor.

Doing as I was told, I preoccupied myself with kicking off my shoes and toeing off my socks while The Doctor lifted me away from the wall and started down the hall. I didn't pay attention to where we were going, as long as we got there quickly and with reasonably less clothing.

I nudged The Doctor's leather jacket off his shoulders. He maneuvered one arm out of it at a time to make sure he didn't drop me. The piece of clothing fell to the metal floor with a heavy thump. I kissed him again, possessively probing his mouth with my tongue. He kissed back just as strongly, now stumbling as if he'd forgotten how to walk in a straight line.

The Doctor broke away, gasping, and opened his eyes to watch where he was going. "Dahlia, we'll never get there if ya don't let me concentrate," he grunted. "Hard enough as it is."

Pouting, I relented. I'd rather wait a bit now rather than never get to wherever he was taking me.

He stopped at a door I wasn't familiar with, reluctantly removing a hand from my ass to unlock the door. The door creaked open and The Doctor's absent hand immediately sought its earlier placement.

The Doctor kicked the door closed after he stepped through; I took this as a signal to continue what we started in the hall and leaned in for another kiss, but The Doctor dodged and chuckled, the smirk on his face and glint in his eyes telling me to wait. I pouted again. I was tired of waiting. I wasn't a very patient person on a good day, yet alone one where I'd been held hostage, nearly died (twice), and was being teased relentlessly while I was mind-numbingly horny.

So, in retaliation for once again being denied, I ground my hips against The Doctor's with as much force as I could manage in my current position.

The Doctor stumbled; I felt his legs wobble and threaten to give out.

He hurriedly moved farther into the room. His face was a deliciously flushed, and I could see sweat dripping down his temples and sliding down the strong column of his throat. Smirking, I opened my mouth to comment on his flustered appearance, but he dumped me unceremoniously on a very cushy surface.

"Oof," I grunted. Giving The Doctor a nonthreatening glare, I muttered, "Oh yes, very smart, rudely dump the girl who wants to screw you onto a random surface—"

"It's not a random surface," he said. "It's my bed."

I frowned. "Your . . ." I blinked in realization. "Oh." Realizing the implications of that, I finally took the time to observe my surroundings.

The room was messy, to put it bluntly, not in the slob kind of messy. More like the Everything Interests Me At The Same Time And I Also Kinda Have No More Shelves kind of messy. Machinery, musical instruments, coils of wiring, unframed artwork—some I recognized as human (Is that a car battery hooked up to bicycle frame?) and others I knew were trinkets from alien planets.

And then there was the bed. Gloriously soft but still firm enough to be supportive, the king-sized
creation had a unique canopy. By unique I mean it seemed to be made out of stars and galaxies intricately swirling together to create barely-there shimmers of fabric.

Turning my head every which way, I tried to take in every inch of the darkened room. I had never been in here before. Hell, I didn't even know it existed! The Doctor never alluded to having a room of his own. Sure, I had always thought he had his own room, but I never thought he'd let me see it.

Movement caught my eye. The Doctor was slowly tugging his clothes off, watching me carefully, like if he moved too fast I would change my mind.

Smirking, I gave him my full attention, tracing the movement of his muscles whenever he moved.

He froze, shirt still hanging from his hand. "What?" he asked nervously. If the room were brighter, I'm sure I would have seen a blush on his cheeks.

"Just enjoying the show," I purred. I had undoubtedly hit a nerve of self-doubt because The Doctor stopped moving altogether. Holding in my impatient sigh, I peeled my own shirt off before crawling toward him on my hands and knees. The Doctor's ragged breaths increased in volume as I reached out and took hold of his belt, undoing it and sliding it from his belt loops. I dropped the belt to the floor—it clattered when it made contact—and pressed a kiss on The Doctor's abdominals, slowly making my way down before being stopped by his jeans. I slid my tongue along the seam of skin and clothing. Goosebumps rose along the tan skin in reaction.

The Doctor groaned softly. His breath hitched with every flick of my tongue.

Balancing myself by grasping one of his thighs, I unbuttoned and unzipped The Doctor's pants, tugging them down from his hips. I expected another layer of cloth, but a very hard, very bare erection met me instead.

"I didn't know you went commando," I said, mostly to myself, but I glanced up at The Doctor as if waiting for an explanation.

He blinked his half lidded, fogged over eyes in a half-assed attempt to clear his head and respond. He opened his mouth but all that came out was a low moan.

Smirking, I gripped his erection tightly at the base and slowly pumped him. The Doctor immediately gripped my shoulders, breath hissing out from his clenched teeth and tilting his head back. I continued my slow pace, reveling in just how much power I had over him. Lowering my mouth, I licked off the beads of pre-come that had formed at the tip.

The Doctor's hands clenched down on my shoulders. "I-I'm not gonna last if you do that."

Grinning slyly, I shrugged. "Doesn't matter. I'm sure your Time Lord biology will have you ready again in only a few minutes." Then I took the leaking head in my mouth, sucking gently on it and tonguing the slit.

He pulled me off. I frowned. Wasn't he enjoying it? I knew I hadn't really gotten to do anything yet, but he could at least give me a chance. "What?" I questioned.

At first, he stayed silent, making it his mission to remove my bra without initiating eye contact. I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. If that's all he wanted, he could've just said so, but nooo, he had to go and annoy me. Stupid Time Lords and their inability to voice their wants.

I leaned forward again to resume pleasuring him, but The Doctor pulled me away again. I gave him an annoyed look. I mean, come on! What guy turns down a blow job?
"Dahlia, I told you," he mumbled, gently pushing me back onto the bed. "I want to last. There's plenty of time for that later."

I wanted to protest, but all I could do was shiver under the intensity of his lust-dark eyes. Squirming, I kept my hands at my sides. I had no reason to cover myself, but the longer he stood there, the more self-conscious I felt. My discomfort must've shown because The Doctor was then climbing onto the bed to straddle me.

Grinning widely, he kissed me while his hands wandered; they didn't spend as much time at my breasts as I thought they would. I would've been insulted if not for where they went next—the button of my jeans.

The Doctor broke the kiss to whisper in my ear, "You're wearin' too many clothes."

The warm puff of air at my ear did nothing to control my erratic nerves. I was still trying to convince myself this was happening. The Doctor and I were going to have sex. The Doctor was naked and straddling me. My eyes roamed over his naked form for good measure. Being naked suited him. I should really try to convince him to walk around naked more often. Seriously, who needs clothes? Clothes are stupid and all they do is keep me from admiring just how hot The Doctor is. Note to Self: get rid of all—

A sharp spark of pain at my throat jolted me from my thoughts. The Doctor soothed the nip from his tongue before grazing his teeth along my collar bone. "Your mind was wanderin'. Can't have that, can we?" he hummed, dipping his fingers just below my waistband.

My cheeks burned, and my legs spread apart unconsciously at the action. Heat boiled in my lower abdomen. "N-No, we can't," I stuttered, looking away from his dark eyes for a fraction of a second to relieve the arousal coiling in my gut. Mustering up some sarcasm from God knows where, I said, "And, while you were the one complaining about me wearing too much, you don't seem to be doing anything about it."

He chuckled at my failed attempt at seeming unaffected. I huffed and wriggled underneath him. If he was going to laugh at me instead of undressing me, then I'd find something else to preoccupy my time.

The Doctor tightened his grip on my hip, smirking. "No need to get testy, Dahlia." He tilted his head to the side curiously. "Maybe I should teach you some patience."

"And maybe I should teach you some manners," I snapped back, glaring at him. My arousal had died down; it only flickered briefly instead of the inferno it had been.

The Time Lord frowned and inhaled deeply at my throat. He stayed there for several long moments, not doing anything except muttering to himself in such a low register that I couldn't hear him.

Maybe I should just go to sleep, I thought mournfully. I really had been looking forward to actual sex.

"Oh God!" I cried out suddenly. The Doctor had bitten down at the juncture of my neck and shoulder at the same time he ground his erection into my core.

Grunting, The Doctor growled, "I believe it's time you stopped thinking."

I tossed my head back and bit my lip, whimpering. The heat between my legs was back full force. I draped my arms over his shoulders, digging into them with my short nails.
He moaned at the action, pausing in the act of leaving a hickey between my collarbones, and moving down to my breasts. One of his hands was still preoccupied with tightly gripping my hip, but his free hand immediately cupped one mound of flesh; his tongue swirled around the nipple of the other.

I took this time to get control of my breathing. I didn't know about other women, but my breasts had never been that sensitive. As long as he didn't—

"Ah!" I whimpered, my nails scraping long streaks up The Doctor's back. He had apparently figured out that sucking was the best way to get a reaction out of me.

He smirked against my abused skin, nipping and sucking and caressing with his tongue to apologize before switching to the barely touched breast.

Blood throbbed between my legs until the pleasure was almost painful. My breath was coming in short pants and gasps, and I couldn't catch my breath. The Doctor seemed to be having too much fun to let up, even when I begged. Through the fog of my lust-addled mind, I registered The Doctor's hand unbuttoning and unzipping my pants, attempting to remove them without tearing himself away from my chest.

If I had any air in my lungs to spare, I would've laughed at his horrendous attempt at multitasking. Of course The Doctor would rather fumble with my pants for several minutes instead of just pulling away from my seemingly very interesting nipples for a few seconds to discard my clothing. No, that would be too simple. Filing those thoughts away for later use, I removed my arms from The Doctor's neck (merely grinning at the confused look he gave me) and used them to shove both my jeans and panties off in one go, kicking the fabric away from my legs and off the bed. A large grin overtook The Doctor's face at this new development, but I barely noticed; I was too busy feeling how The Doctor's skin felt against my own.

I couldn't describe how perfectly we fit together, even with him dragging his teeth along my ribs and causing my breath to catch in my throat. Every phrase I knew just seemed so overused. Maybe The Doctor was right, maybe it was time I stopped thinking.

Speaking of The Doctor, he was making his way down my torso, swiping at different patches of skin with his tongue and letting his hot breath fan over the wet spots. The farther down he went, the more labored my breathing became. And the more labored my breathing became, the slower he went until he was right below my navel, kissing the skin with the gentlest brush of his lips. His eyes stared into mine, the pupils blown with lust and mischief, goading me to order him to go further.

Swallowing, I met his challenge, begging softly, "Doctor, please . . . please don't tease me."

He chuckled, and I almost thought he was going to pull away, but he didn't; hot breath fanned over my wet core, forcing me to bite my lip to keep in the whimpers that threatened to escape. Unable to keep The Doctor's stare, I turned my eyes to the glittering canopy.

Another chuckle. My cheeks burned hotly. The knots in my stomach were going to kill me if he didn't do something.

A wet appendage lightly traced the seam of my opening from top to bottom. The breath wheezed from my lungs, and I didn't try to stop the soft keening sound I didn't even know I could make. The tongue retreated for the briefest of seconds before returning to circle my clit with feather light touches. I pressed my hips toward The Doctor, silently begging for more, and let out a frustrated noise when I was denied.
"Doctor!" I wanted to sound intimidating, but my voice drew the word into a whine instead. I propped myself up on my elbows to look down at him.

He rested his head on my thigh, scratching his stubble against it while he looked at me innocently. "Somethin' wrong?"

I huffed and collapsed back into the sheets.

The Doctor sat up. His strong figure loomed over me, and I was suddenly struck by how intimidating he was, even naked and glistening was a light sheen of sweat. I looked up at him with wide, surprised eyes, no clue as to what he was thinking.

He grinned and grasped my calves tightly. "Guess I'll find out on my own, then."

I was in the middle of rolling my eyes when he jerked me forward by my legs, pulling them over his shoulders and suspending more than half my body in the air.

A high-pitched shriek echoed off the dark bedroom walls. My arms flailed in my few seconds of panic, grasping wildly at the sheets for unneeded balance. The adrenaline rush faded, but it was replaced by a new wave of lust and anticipation. This was a new position for me. No one I had ever been with had ever tried this before. I think it might've been because they didn't have the upper body strength to support me for that long, but that's not important; what was important was the fact that The Doctor kept flicking his eyes back between my center and my face, licking his lips and waiting for me to realize what he was about to do. And God . . . my entire body shivered when I realized he was going to eat me out like this, suspended on just his shoulders.

I readjusted my legs so he wouldn't have to hold them. I gave him a smile that was both shy and devious (in some impossible way) and looked up at him through half-lidded eyes. "Well?" I muttered, stroking my foot along his back. "What're you waiting for? Fix it."

He gave me the happiest grin and grasped my rear to pull me closer. His eyes connected with mine one more time before he focused completely on his task.

His tongue was back, gently parting my outer lips to lick along their insides. He hummed appreciatively and flicked the inner lips before delicately sliding along my opening. Teasing but never venturing forth, The Doctor moved up to my clit to fully lavish it, using differencing intervals of tongue and sucking.

That's when my thoughts really stopped. Moans welled in my throat, but I stifled them out of habit. The Doctor forced me to break that habit with a sharp pinch to my ass. I glared at him but couldn't hold onto the anger for long because he did this twisty thing with his tongue that turned me into a gasping pile of mush.

I scrambled for something to hold. Normally I would grab the guy's shoulders or bury my hands in his hair, but my current position didn't allow that so I settled for ripping the stitches of the bedspread.

"Oh God . . . Doctor . . . Doctor," I whimpered, biting my lip. I was so, so close. All he needed to do was keep doing that undulating thing but just a bit deeper and . . . "Oh!" My mouth dropped open and I could practically feel my eyes glaze over when my orgasm hit. The Doctor continued thrusting his tongue inside me in time with my bucking hips, letting me ride out my aftershocks.

After several seconds, I was nearly too sensitive for him to continue. My hips kept twitching away from him, even though I desperately wanted him to continue. The Doctor finally called it quits.
when I started begging. Begging for him to stop or keep going, I couldn’t remember which.

With a tenderness I had never seen before, The Doctor kissed and nuzzled my inner thighs before gently settling them onto the bed. He slinked up my body and kissed me, slowly parting my lips to caress every cranny of my mouth with his tongue.

Breaking away, The Doctor closed his eyes and pressed his forehead to mine. "Dahlia, I . . . I . . ."
He swallowed thickly and tried again but couldn't say what he seemed to be trying to himself to say.

I caught on quicker than I normally would have. Carding a hand through his hair, I held him in place, smiling reassuringly even though he couldn't see it. "You don't have to say it," I whispered caringly. "I already know, Doctor. You don't have to force yourself." Still smiling, I pressed a kiss to his forehead.

He gave me a grateful stare and kissed me again; this time when he broke away he muttered an almost inaudible sentence against my lips. "Dahlia, if you want to stop, we can. I-I don't want to push you."

Groaning in annoyance, I jerked him forward to kiss him fiercely. "We aren't stopping, you idiot," I panted, raking my nails across his scalp. He groaned, so I did it again. "Just go slow. It's been over a year since my last time."

The Doctor nodded against my throat, grazing it with his teeth. "Ready?" he mumbled.

"Yes," I said airily, whatever brain power I still had was focused on staying pliable and not tensing.
Balancing his body on one arm with amazing ease, The Doctor guided his cock to my opening with the free hand. He paused just before entering. "You're—"

"Yes, Doctor, I'm sure! Now stop stopping!" I growled, attempting to grind my cunt onto him. I could feel the dripping head against my folds, but it wasn't enough; I needed him inside me.

He grinned, withholding his laughter, though I felt it anyway, and no less than a second after I spoke, The Doctor was pressing forward, slowly sliding inside me like I had requested. He grunted, and his hips involuntarily twitched at random intervals. I attempted to make a mental note to thank him for his self-control later, but my brain soon became overloaded with the glorious sensation of being filled after being practically celibate for so long.

The Doctor's other arm mirrored the first at the empty space beside my head, propping him up so he could give me an intense stare. "Everything all right?" he asked hesitantly, searching my face for any signs of distress.

"Only thing wrong is that you aren't moving." I squirmed under him in an attempt to get him to move.

He grunted again and slowly pulled out, roughly snapping his hips back against mine. I moaned and clutched his shoulders; a thrill of pleasure had immediately raced through my body at the action and I yearned for more.

"That what you wanted?" he asked, smoothly rocking his hips instead of the rough thrusting I wanted.

"Yes," I hissed. I glared up at him, but only received a cheeky grin in response.
"All I needed to hear." The Doctor braced his arms on the headboard and used it as leverage when he started thrusting.

The room was then filled with moans, gasps, grunts, begging, and the slapping on flesh on flesh. The sounds permeated the air but rarely bounced off the walls, like one of the wails I was forced to release after The Doctor twisted his hips and hit a spot I hadn't known existed until then. I didn’t know how long we lasted; in reality, it must've been maybe ten or fifteen minutes of actual sex, but it felt much, much longer than that. I wanted it to be longer than that.

Heat coiled in my lower abdomen. I was so close. I could feel the blood pulsing through my veins; hear my heart pounding in my ears. I was gasping for air, but no matter how quickly I inhaled, it was never enough. My vision was going cross-eyed, too. I could barely keep my eyes focused on The Doctor now the pleasure was so intense.

Oh God . . . "Doctor," I moaned softly when my orgasm peaked. As I orgasmed, my inner walls clenched down on The Doctor's cock. His steady pace faltered, and I knew he was following me, even before his hand touched my temple.

A surge of lust, pleasure, and heat engulfed me. It threatened to consume me, but when I was on the urge of drowning, The Doctor pulled his hand away. He collapsed beside me, gasping for breath like I was.

"Sorry . . . about . . . that," he panted, throwing an arm around my waist.

I took a moment to pull my thoughts together so I could form a coherent sentence. "What . . . was that?" I asked breathlessly.

The Doctor blushed, choosing to rake his eyes over my exposed form rather than at my eyes. "When I entered your mind, I had planned to just share a few of my emotions with you. It didn't go as well as I'd hoped."

My breathing finally slowed enough so that, though my voice was soft, I wasn't panting. "You lost control?"

". . . Yes."

I smiled smugly. "I made The Doctor orgasm so hard he lost control. I need to get that on a T-shirt."

He snorted. "Oh, shut it." He propped himself up on an arm. "Did you enjoy it?"

I raised my head to give him an un-amused stare. "Did I enjoy it? Do you see me complaining? No, I scoffed. "I'd say it's the best sex I've ever had."

He grinned and purred, "Best sex ever?"

I rolled my eyes and maneuvered the covers over me. "You can brag tomorrow, Doctor. For now, let's just sleep, okay?"

The Doctor slipped under the covers behind me, wrapping me up fully in his arms to spoon. Nuzzling my sweat sticky neck, he mumbled, "Best sex ever? Really?"

Sighing tiredly, I reached back and patted The Doctor's face gently. "Yes, Theta, best sex ever. Now go to sleep."
Only Way to See an Air Raid

Life progressed normally on the U.S.S. TARDIS. Well, as normal as it could be for us. I got kidnapped a few times (not my fault, by the way. The Doctor wandered off and left me alone, so you can blame him); The Doctor rescued me; we blew up a few buildings (the first two were accidents, the third was planned); and I found out that Nine could be very possessive. Also, I needed to realize how other species flirted. Seems that was a greater skill than I first believed.

Ashley asked for The Doctor to take her back in her own timeline. To see her dad. I didn't join them on that trip. I had warned Ashley she wouldn't like what she found if she went, but she persisted, and I refused to join them. The Doctor didn't seem pleased with the idea of going back in her time stream at all, let alone without me, but I managed to convince him to do this one thing for her. I had hoped it would offer some closure for her. I was half right in the end.

When they returned, Ashley was crying, but by the look on The Doctor's face, she had been a lot worse off earlier.

She didn't hate me, either, which I was grateful for. I had expected some screamed accusations of knowing everything and then refusing to change it. Ashley didn't scream or yell or try to make me feel guilty. She just hugged me and cried, and I tried my best to comfort her, muttering apologies the entire time.

Then we were back at what we did best. The Doctor took me to this place called The Restaurant at the End of the Universe. Not too bad of a place, but not my favorite. Strange thing though, The Doctor nagged me about bringing a towel with us in my bag for hours, not allowing us to leave the TARDIS until I had agreed to keeping one with me at all times. I should probably ask him about that.

Today was a day for relaxation. Or that was what I told The Doctor. Yesterday I had been kidnapped and hung over volcano by a group of Aixens to appease their war god, and let me tell you, being suspended over a nearly endless pit of lava by only a rickety pulley system and rope was not my suggestion for a good time. The Doctor had rescued me, though, and we had made a mad dash to the TARDIS, dodging arrows and spears across the mint green grasslands.

But today I was going to relax. I was going to take a long bubble bath in the swimming pool sized, in-ground bathtub in The Doctor's sprawling bathroom (seriously, this thing's around half a football field in sheer size), and then I was going to play video games in the virtual reality room. I was contemplating sex for afterwards, but I would have to see how I felt after my gaming streak.

I had just finished stripping and had one leg submerged in the bath when the alarms went off. I froze. *Fuck.* Mauve lights flashed obnoxiously, painting me in their colors. Scowling and muttering curse words under my breath, I dried off my leg and stormed to the door. It opened up to my room. Mentally thanking the TARDIS, I quickly dressed in the clothing she had already laid out on my bed—underwear, supportive bra, pale blue jeans, socks, dark blue converse, and surprise surprise, a union jack T-shirt.

My irritation evaporated immediately. *Jack! I'm going to meet Captain Jack Harkness! Well, technically I've already met him but that Jack was from my future, this time I'm from his!* Grinning stupidly, I dashed out of my room; this time the door led to the hallway, like it was supposed to. I
thanked Sexy again and took off down the hallway. Was it wrong that I had actually developed a technique that allowed me to, mostly, keep my balance when the TARDIS was out of control? I should probably feel weird about it, but I didn't. It just felt natural.

After only hitting a relatively small number of walls and corners, I made it to the main control room. I hung onto the railing for balance when I went down the stairs, shouting, "What did you do?"

The Doctor briefly looked up from the console to glare at me. "Not my fault. The thing's mauve, what did you expect me to do?"

I rolled my eyes and joined him at the console (Well, I stumbled and slammed into it. My midsection was going to be bruised for a while). "I would've preferred you not slaving the TARDIS to it. If it's mauve and dangerous, I'd like to plan ahead a bit rather than potentially dying in a fiery crash."

He was the one to roll his eyes this time. "Plans are stupid. Besides, I know what I'm doin'!" he said, just when the TARDIS lurched dangerously on her side. I clicked the first, third, and fourth domino buttons down and flipped a large switch to sort-of stabilize us. When we were right side up again (but still jerking around madly), I sent The Doctor a glare. He chuckled nervously, dodging a shower of sparks. "See?" he grinned. "Everything's fine."

I was tempted to let him have his way. "This isn't safe."

"It totally is," he replied brightly. The console exploded again. I stumbled back into another section of railing. "Okay, reasonably. Should have said 'reasonably' there."

"Do you even know what this thing is?"

"No idea."

"Then why are we chasing it?" I shouted back.

"It's mauve and dangerous. And about thirty seconds from the center of London."

I burst out laughing, my bad mood completely gone. I loved just how nonchalant he was about this—shackling the TARDIS to a dangerous, unknown object, flying almost completely out of control to London. It was perfect.

He grinned at me. "Mind helpin' out here? Only got two hands."

I didn't try to stop the smile that spread across my mouth. "Sure, why not?" I laughed, taking the place opposite of The Doctor. "Lord knows you need all the help you can get!"

He tried to twist his expression into something less pleasant, but he couldn't seem to do it. Instead, he clung to the console and tried not to fall over as the TARDIS continued her mad descent to Earth.

We landed in an alley during the night. Clothes hung out to dry on lines above us that crisscrossed between buildings. The buildings themselves were all made of brick; dirt clung to their imperfections. Boxes were piled up in random spaces, along with trash.
I stepped out of the TARDIS first. What could I say? I was excited. London at the height of the blitz and one of the happiest days of The Doctor's life with a side of Captain Jack—who wouldn't be excited about that? The only thing that worried me was when I would have to 'wander off' with the barrage balloon. I was _not_ looking forward to that.

The Doctor grinned at me. "Do you know how long we can knock around space without having to bump into Earth?"

I spun around to face him. "I dunno. Five days? Or is that just when we're out of milk?"

He snorted. "Of all the species in all the universe and it has to come out of a cow."

"It's a human thing, you wouldn't understand," I said, waving off his mood. "How far behind it were we?"

The Doctor caught on quickly. "Must have come down somewhere quite close. Within a mile, anyway. And it can't have been more than a few weeks ago. Maybe a month."

I raised an eyebrow at him. "A month? Really? Couldn't have cut it a bit closer?"

He looked at me indignantly. "It was jumping time tracks all over the place. We're bound to be a little bit out. Do _you_ wanna drive?"

I smirked and teased, "Sure. I'm much better at it than you are anyway. How much is 'a little'?"

"A bit."

"Is that _exactly_ a bit?"

"Ish."

I giggled at his annoyed response. Oh how I loved to tease my Time Lord. My smile softened at that thought. My Time Lord . . . I liked the ring of it and it was made all the better because it was _true_. He was mine. _I owe The Face of Boe an apology_, I thought happily. Never doubt Jack; he was always right.

"So, what's your plan to find the mauve and dangerous thing?" I asked, shuffling behind him through the alley.

He gave me puzzled stare. "Dahlia, it hit the middle of London with a very loud bang. I'm gonna ask," he replied, holding up the psychic paper.

I ignored the paper, which read 'Doctor John Smith, Ministry of Asteroids', and snorted. "For once, could you be a bit more futuristic in your information gathering? I see no reason why we have to talk to _people_."

He snorted in amusement. "You're only sayin' that 'cus you hate people."

Wrinkling my nose in distaste, I whined, "It's not my fault! People are just so difficult! They panic too easily and rarely ask the right questions."

He chuckled. "Not everyone can be as clever as us, Dahlia."

Scoffing, I said, "You're one to talk, with all your rambling of stupid apes."

"You know what? Let's have a bit of hush, all right?" The Doctor strolled toward a plain door at the
end of the alley. A large pile of trash was to the left of it.

Snickering, I followed. "You're just upset because I won."

"No, I let you win. Big difference."

"I won, fair and square. Just admit it. It'll make us both feel better."

"How would admitting defeat make me feel better?" he asked incredulously, looking at me from over his shoulder.

I pretended to think. "Okay, so it won't make you feel better, but then I could properly gloat, like it should be."

The Doctor snorted and went back to attempting to open the door with his sonic screwdriver. "Door, music, people. What d'you think?"

"I think you should do a scan for alien tech," I snipped, crossing my arms over my chest and cocking a hip out.

"Are you sure about that T-shirt?" he threw out, ignoring my statement.

I shrugged, even though he couldn't see it. "It's okay, a bit bright, but the TARDIS picked it out for me so I thought I'd humor her."

The Doctor said something, but I didn't hear him. I was too focused on the soft voice crying out, "Mummy!" I stiffened briefly before relaxing. That was my cue. Hopefully The Doctor wouldn't be too upset that I had wandered off.

Silently, I backed away from him and toward the little boy. Fear pulsed overpoweringly through my bloodstream. The fear wasn't from knowing what the boy could do. It was more from him being a creepy, little child. Children, why'd it have to be children? Snakes or skydiving I could deal with, but kids? I thought I deserved a break every once in a while.

"Mummy?"

The Doctor finally got the door opened. "Come on if you're coming. Won't take a minute." Unlike with Rose, he waited for my answer.

I shook my head. "Nah, nothing in there but boring people smoking and drinking. I'll stay out here, thank you very much."

He laughed. "Suit yourself, don't wander off, alright? Don't want you gettin' hurt."

I smiled, his concern sending warm flutters through my stomach. "I won't wander off unless I have to. Promise," I said. He gave me a grin and a swift kiss before retreating into the bar. Strolling briskly down the alley, I turned my attention to the rooftop gremlin. I could see him, even from my low vantage point, and a set of stairs that would lead up to the rooftop with the barrage balloon. Climbing up was easy. Making myself hold onto a floating bomb wasn't.

"Mummy?"

Inhaling deeply to steel my nerves, I grasped the rope and started climbing. "All right, you possessed cretin, don't you dare move, or I'll sonic you into next week," I said under my breath.

"Are you my mummy?" the boy asked curiously, staring down at me. Goosebumps prickled along
my skin when the gasmask's eyes connected with mine; I nearly released the rope.

"No," I huffed. "I am not your mummy."

He tilted his head to the side. "Mummy?"

I opened my mouth to give another useless retort when the rope slipped away from the building. I yelped in surprise; I hadn't thought it would've happened so quickly. Briefly, I thought about letting go, but by the time the thought occurred to me, I was already too high up.

"Well, guess I just have to wait for Jack to rescue me," I grumbled halfheartedly. I took the time to observe my new mode of transportation. Yep, just a giant, zeppelin-shaped balloon attacked to a rope. Dangling me over London. During the blitz. Speaking of which, I chanced a look down and gasped in amazement. Everything seemed so distorted from way up high: the buildings too small, bombs exploding, planes whipping past me. My fear melded into excitement and adrenaline. I was still afraid, but—

A whole squadron of screaming planes appeared from the darkness. I curled in on myself to cover up my shirt. *Maybe I should've picked something else...*

More planes flew by, even closer than the last few. A gust of wind from one of them swung me from side to side, loosening my grip on the rope and forcing me to slide down a foot. Bombs exploded midair not far from me. *Oh God, this is not fun anymore,* I thought as panic settled firmly in my chest.

Gusts of wind twisted me from side to side. For a few seconds they died down, and I noticed I was facing a slightly familiar building. *Wait... is that... the building Jack's in?* I thought dazedly. *Well, it's worth a shot.* Then I gave one of the windows the fiercest glare I could muster. I would've held it for longer, but a bomb forced me to lose my concentration.

"Oh God, this is not good. Not good at all. I swear to God, if that asshole doesn't hurry up and—"
A bomb went off right under me. It startled me into letting go of the rope.

I didn't scream. I was proud of myself for that. Drop from a barrage balloon into a war zone from a deadly height? No problem.

Right. No one believes me anyway, so I might as well tell the truth. I was terrified. I stopped breathing. My lungs felt as if they were collapsing in on themselves. My heart seemed to stop beating for several seconds. All I felt was the rush of the air around me as I fell.

And then it stopped. I opened my eyes (When had I closed them?) to see I was caught in a tractor beam.

"Okay, okay, I've got you!" A teasing, albeit slightly annoyed voice called out.

Inhaling deeply to calm myself, I asked, "And you would be?"

"I'm just programming your descent pattern. Just stay as still as you can and keep all limbs inside the light field."

Refusing to pout because he'd ignored my question, I reached into my pocket for my phone. Predicting his next request would at least give me some credibility to my Time Agent persona.

"Thanks for turning off your phone. It really interferes with my instrument," he said.
Putting my phone back, I smiled politely. "No problem, but could ya speed it up a bit? I'm kinda hanging in the middle of a German air raid with a Union Jack across my front," I shouted evenly. Jack chuckled. Even though I felt guilty about it, I couldn't stop the blush that heated up my cheeks. Jack really did have a sexy laugh.

"Be with you in a mo'."

"M'kay . . . so I'll just . . . hang out . . ." I wrinkled my nose in disgust. "Okay, that was just awful. Can I take it back?"


I gave my best What-The-Hell face in the direction of the beam. "To what? The air? It hasn't exactly been much help up until now, and I highly doubt it's going to change its ways just for me."

"Fair point."

Without another warning, I was being pulled in by the beam. I let out a very embarrassing squeak and prayed the Jack hadn't heard it. Another second later, and I was being cradled to a very well-muscled man.

"Don't worry, I gotcha," he cooed. "You're just fine. The tractor beam can scramble your head just a little." He trailed off into those attractive chuckles again.

I blinked the spots from my eyes and eventually closed them to try and get the world to stop spinning.

"Hey, you all right? Do you have some sort of medical condition or something—" Jack started, concern peeking through his words.

I pressed the hand that wasn't fisted in the neck of his shirt to his mouth. "Just need a bit of shush until the world stops spinning, please and thank you," I murmured, groaning and flopping my head back.

A large smile spread out underneath my hand. I could practically see his intent.

"I swear to God, if you lick my hand, I will smack you," I grumbled with no real menace.

He chuckled again before licking a very thin, very faint line across my palm. His tongue retreated for him to flirt back, "Promise?"

Groaning mentally, I squirmed in Jack's grip, partly because I felt awkward being held this way by someone I only knew from a TV show; the other part because my traitorous hormones were reacting to his flirty, 51st Century hormones and overall sexiness. And while Jack was hot, I was potentially in love with The Doctor and had a very fresh and fragile relationship with him. I was not going to ruin that for a one night stand with Captain Harkness.

I removed my hand from his mouth. "I think it's time you put me down now, sir."

"Sir?" Jack raised an eyebrow, still smirking devilishly. "Now, now, we can't have any of that. Well, unless that's what you're into."

I gave him a very un-amused stare.

He sighed heavily. "It was fun while it lasted." He gently put me down.
I swayed slightly, but Jack was there to steady me. "You sure you're all right?" he asked again.

I waved off his concern. "I'm fine. I'm doing much better than I thought I would for my first time in a tractor beam. I just need to re-find my center of gravity." After another second or two or swaying, I tilted my head at an angle and everything was fine. No swaying, no spots, no queasiness. "Huh," I said, frowning.

"What?"

I blinked. "Oh, nothing, everything's fine now."

"Really?" Jack asked disbelievingly.

"Yeah, why?"

"Cuz ya looked a bit out of it there for a minute."

"Yeah, just got my equilibrium back, that's all," I said. "Good thing, too, I did not want to pass out."

Jack nodded in agreement. "Yeah, that normally happens with first timers. Surprised you didn't faint, though."

I shrugged and offered, "Must be lucky." Brushing myself off, I started to inspect the inner workings of Jack's ship. Strangely, I could identify that this was a Chula ship, just by the way everything was placed. I knew what several of the buttons would do; I could probably even fly the thing if I needed to. A twinge of worry gnawed at my gut. How'd I know those things? They weren't explained in the show.

I would've spent the next hour trying to figure what was going on, but Jack cleared his throat. I spun around to face him, trying not to show my embarrassment, but he seemed to see it anyway if his coy smile was anything to go by.

I avoided looking directly at him, instead asking, "You've got lights in here?"

"Yes, I do," he purred and strolled over to the pilot seat, flicking on the lights before gracefully sitting down. He smiled. "Hello."

"Hello," I quietly repeated, shuffling just a bit closer to him. "So, who are you?"

"Captain Jack Harkness: 133 squadron, Royal Air Force, American volunteer," he said smoothly, taking out a wallet and handing it to me.

It was my turn to smirk. "Liar," I mocked, dragging my eyes up from the message to give him a smug look for a few seconds. "This is psychic paper. It tells me whatever you want it to tell me."

Jack leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms. "How do you know?"

"Well, first off, my partner uses this all the time, and second, you just handed me a piece of paper telling me you're single and you work out," I finished, not even trying to hide my teasing.

"Tricky thing, psychic paper," Jack attempted to cover himself, but I just shook my head.

"Best not to try." I snickered and handed the wallet back to him.

He laughed embarrassedly, looking away from me and then at the paper. Jack seemed to pout for a bit, but then he sighed. "Oh well."
I tilted my head inquisitively. "What?"

He read what was on the paper out loud, "'Name's Dahlia Tombew. Sorry, not available, but flattered at your interest'. Damn."

I mouthed 'Oh'. "Didn't mean to think that. Sorry."

Jack waved off my apologies. "It's fine. At least you let me down easy."

I stood and stretched. "How 'bout we try and get along without the psychic paper, hm?"

"That would probably be best," Jack said wryly, standing as well.

I walked around the ship, examining everything. "Nice ship," I commented. "Though, I don't see many humans piloting Chula ships."

Jack shrugged. "It gets me around. How'd you know it was Chula?"

"It's a bit too compact for human design, and the Chula people are a bit slimmer than us. Also, there's the manufacturing information right there," I stated, pointing to a section of beaming.

He smiled. "Can't get anything past you, can I?"

I continued to inspect a very interesting vent. I don't know why it was interesting. I just knew it was. Maybe the design? "Don't feel bad, not a lot of people can. My partner has kinda rubbed off on me in that way. You know, the whole 'everything's important so notice everything'?" I said offhandedly, trailing my fingers over a newly repaired section of wiring. Impressive work . . . "So where're you from? Not from around here, that's for sure."

"Cell phone, fabrics that won't be around for at least another two decades, and a sonic device," Jack rambled off, looking at the scanner on his wrist. "I'm guessing you're not a local girl."

"You're guessing right." I leaned over the pilot's chair to get a better look at a scanner, bracing my weight on one of my hands, but instantly recoiled, a hiss escaping from between my teeth. I glared at my injured palms. It didn't hurt that bad, definitely not as much as the burns I had received from Platform One, but the pain was still a surprise.

"You burn your hands on the rope?" Jack asked, craning his neck slightly to inspect the damage.

I nodded. "Yeah, no big deal. I've had worse."

A bomb fell, shrilly shrieking until it hit the ground. I frowned. "Those people down there . . . we are cloaked, aren't we?"

Jack nodded. "Of course. Can I have a look at your hands for a moment?"

I feigned suspicion and hoped Jack bought it. He held out his hand. "Please?" Huffing, I gave in, holding out my hands, palms upward. Jack moved to my side and waved a buzzing tool over them. "You can stop acting now," he said. "I know exactly who you are. I can spot a Time Agent a mile away."

Snickering, I looked him in the eye. "I was wondering when you were gonna bring it up."

"I've been expecting one of you guys to show up. Though, I didn't expect one to come by barrage balloon. You always travel that way?" Jack inquired, leaning just a fraction closer.
I laughed, saying, "No, normally I get around in a big, blue box." The confused expression on Jack's face forced me into another round of snickers.

He pointedly ignored my laughing at his expense and tied his scarf around my hands. "Just try and hold still," he said, pressing a few switches behind me. A glowing group of what looked like gnats hovered in my palms. "Nanogenes, subatomic robots, the air's full of them." The nanogenes expanded and contracted their sphere, causing my skin to tingle as it healed.

Jack turned off the switches he had pressed earlier. The nanogenes faded away. "They just repaired three layers of your skin," he said, unwinding the scarf from my wrists.

"Impressive," I murmured, running my fingers along the newly repaired skin of both palms.

Jack grinned and stood, moving to gather something from a fridge-like device. "Let's get down to business."

"Yeah, we probably should," I said absentmindedly.

He held a bottle of champagne in one hand and asked, "Shall we have a drink on the balcony?" A ramp descended from the ceiling. "Bring up the glasses."

Attempting to smother a smile, I grabbed two glasses and followed him onto the roof of the ship.

When I first stepped out onto the roof, paranoia made me step lightly everywhere, even though I knew the ship was large. Forgive me if I actually want to see what I'm standing on several hundred feet in the air.

Jack was fishing for a corkscrew in his pocket. While he did so, I took the time to take in the sights. We were tethered to Big Ben, and London was tiny below our feet. Fires raged beneath us. I shoved the nagging part of my mind that wanted to make unhelpful connections away, but I still shuddered at the sight of the war playing out. Jack looked at me from the corner of his eye. "You all right?" he asked.

I forced myself to focus on him instead of everything else. Smiling thinly, I forced a laugh. "Yeah, fine, I'd just prefer to see what I'm standing on."

He grinned and laughed in an attempt to lighten my suddenly darker mood. Reaching into another part of his jumpsuit, he pulled out a small device and clicked it on. The cloaking device slowly faded away, revealing the Chula ship beneath.

My brain immediately seized the new opportunity for a distraction. I started examining the ship as best as I could from where I was standing. "Your ship's been remarkably well taken care of, especially since it's, " I made a show of turning around to fully take in the giant clock tower, "tethered to Big Ben."

"First rule of active combat: park somewhere you remember," Jack said slyly, popping the cork on the bottle, startling me into jumping half a foot away from him. He laughed and eased me closer by taking one of my wrists in a gentle hold, pouring us both drinks and then taking one for himself. He sat down, motioning for me to do the same.

"Now, as much as I enjoy a nice drink on top of a ship tied up to Big Ben, I believe we have something to discuss," I hummed, sipping my drink.

Jack smirked. "Yes, we do." He downed his drink in one go. "Are you traveling alone? Are you authorized to negotiate with me?"
"Depends on what we're negotiating," I said matter-of-factly, deciding to finish my drink, as well.

Jack leaned forward. "I have something for the Time Agency, something they'd like to buy. Are you empowered to make payment?"

I sighed. "I normally discuss business deals with my companion. He gets in a right fit when I leave him out of the loop for too long."

A look of surprise took over Jack's face. "Companion?"

I stood up and brushed myself off. "Yeah," I muttered. "I should really be getting back to him. He's probably worried sick by now. He tends to panic when I 'wander off'."

Standing, Jack said disbelievingly, "Him?"

"Yes, him."

He cleared his throat and, using the same little device from earlier, activated Big Ben. Its ring echoed but not deafeningly.

I laughed softly. "Now you're just showing off."

Jack flashed me a charming smile and moved closer to me, putting both his hands on my waist. A flash of heat went through my gut at the touch. I was suddenly in a different place, Skiliaron Seventy-Four to be precise. The Doctor and I had just toppled a malevolent corporation that was stealing people's kidneys and selling them for the highest bidder. We were at some fancy restaurant that required reservations, but The Doctor had used psychic paper to get us in. And we were dancing. I was cradled impossibly close to his chest while he hummed along with the classical alien arrangement we were dancing to, pressing kisses into my hair at random intervals.

I know I'm not one for romance, but *wow* ... when he wanted to, The Doctor could turn me into a swooning pile of goo.

"So, when you say companion," Jack continued, sidling a bit closer and interrupting my reminiscing, "you mean . . ."

I looked him in the eyes and gave him my best I'm-Sorry look. "I mean my lover." *Whoa now.*
Back up. Why *the hell did I say lover? I was going to say boyfriend!* Why couldn't I have said boyfriend? *It sounded so, so . . . much more . . . more . . . adolescent.* I fought the urge to not scowl at myself. Of course I wouldn't (couldn't) use the word boyfriend to describe The Doctor. It didn't even begin to cover a fraction of what he was to me. So, for now, lover would have to do.

Jack immediately slumped in disappointment, muttering a curse under his breath. I was intrigued when, even though he knew I was taken, he still kissed my hand.

"Am I making you uncomfortable?" Jack asked, ever so slightly backing off.

Surprised, I blinked. "Well, no, but I am wondering why you're hitting on me when we're standing on a spaceship in the middle of an air raid when you know I'm taken." Then an idea dawned on me and a corner of my mouth curled into a smirk. "Are you attempting to get on my good side in the chance that I would propose a threesome to my companion? Or did you just want me to put in a good word for you?"

He returned my smirk and leaned in to murmur, "I was just trying to be a gentleman, but if you think it's a possibility . . ."
I teased, "We'll see, but don't count on it. He's very . . . possessive."

"I'll keep that in mind. Now," he let me have my personal space back, "do you like Glenn Miller?"

He didn't give me time to answer, just pressed that little device again and music started playing. He repositioned his grip on me, and we started swaying.

"It's 1941. Height of the London blitz, height of the German bombing campaign, and something else has fallen on London—a fully equipped Chula warship. The last one in existence, armed to the teeth, and I know where it is because I parked it," Jack informed me while we danced. "If the agency can name the right price, I can get it for you. But in two hours, a German bomb is gonna fall on it and destroy it forever. That's your deadline. That's the deal. Now shall we discuss payment?"

I smiled. "So, Mr. Now-I'm-A-Freelance, this is what you do?"

"I prefer to think of myself as a criminal," Jack purred.

"Uh-huh," I hummed, raising an eyebrow.

"So this companion of yours, does he handle the business?"

"I guess it depends," I said. "But, it's really best if I talk to him. Officially, we're the same rank, but he tends to want to get big headed since he's been with the agency longer. Like I said, he'll throw a fit if I make a decision without him."

Jack frowned. "He seems kind of controlling."

I shook my head. "No, he's just been on his own for a while, and he's seen a lot of people get hurt on the job. He just wants to protect me."

"You don't seem to need protecting," Jack noted, glancing me up and down.

I smiled crookedly and said, "No, I don't, but that's not gonna stop him from trying." I broke away from Jack. "We better go find him if you want to discuss business. So come on, scan for alien tech. The faster we get there, the less annoyed he'll be when we do."

Jack snorted and fiddled with his wristband. "One scan for alien tech coming right up."

The trip to the hospital took a surprisingly short amount of time.

Jack had been prepared to break in, but the gates were unlocked. We walked through the dingy hallways of the hospital, each of us calling out to see if anybody was there. Jack was decidedly louder than I was. Unsurprisingly, we didn't have to go far before The Doctor emerged through a pair of double doors at the end of the corridor.

His face lit up when he saw me, and I beamed back. I would've given him a hug, but Jack intercepted him first, shaking his hand and greeting The Doctor with a warm smile, "Good evening, I hope we're not interrupting. Jack Harkness, I've been hearing all about you on the way over."

Remaining as professional as possible, I told The Doctor, "He knows we're Time Agents. Sorry, but I had to tell him."
The Doctor immediately nodded, understanding the plan.

"And it's a real pleasure to meet you, Mr. Spock," Jack said, slapping The Doctor on the back.

The Time Lord gave me a bemused glance. I just winked in explanation. He seemed to like that, a sly smirk creeping onto his mouth. Jack didn't seem to notice and brushed past us to enter the room The Doctor had just left.

"Mr. Spock?" The Doctor asked me, stepping closer to stare me down, literally.

I snickered. "What was I supposed to say? 'The Doctor'? He never would've believed that! And I like Spock. You should be honored that I used that as your alias instead of something Klingon."

"Yeah, yeah," he snorted. "Now where have you been? We're in the middle of a London blitz. It's not a good time for a stroll. And you promised you wouldn't wander off." His tone stated very plainly that he was hurt by my apparent deception.

Wincing, I took his hand. "Sorry about not telling you, but I had to. And I promised that I wouldn't wander off unless I had to, so I didn't lie." We walked toward the double doors. "And I didn't walk. I went by barrage balloon. Only way to see an air raid."

"What?" he sputtered.

"Never mind that, we have more important things to worry about."

"What could be more important than you apparently gallivanting off by barrage balloon?" he hissed, glaring at me.

I rolled my eyes. "There's a Chula warship in London."

The Doctor stopped walking altogether. "Chula?" he mumbled under his breath.

Back in the hospital room, Jack was examining the patients. "This is impossible. How did this happen?" he barked to the air.

"What kind of Chula ship landed here?" The Doctor asked.

Jack whirled around, frowning. "What?"

I answered for him, "He said it was a warship. He stole it . . . parked it somewhere out there where a bomb's gonna fall on it unless we make him an offer."

"What kind of warship?" The Doctor asked, this time a bit louder. I could tell his patience was wearing thin.

Jack stopped pacing to whirl around and face us. "Does it matter? It's got nothing to do with this!"

"This started at the bomb site. It's got everything to do with it. What kind of warship?" The Doctor was close to snarling now as he stared Jack down, advancing on him.

"An ambulance!" Jack snapped. "Look, that's what you chased through the Time Vortex." He activated his wristband and showed us a model of the Chula ship. "It's space junk. I wanted to kid you it was valuable. It's empty. I made sure of it. Nothing but a shell. I threw it at you. Saw your
time travel vehicle and, love the retro look by the way, nice panels, threw ya the bait. I wanted to sell it to you and then destroy it before you had the chance to find out it was junk." He gave us one last scowl before walking a few feet away from us.

"It's a con," he admitted. "I was conning you, that's what I am. I'm a conman. I thought you were Time Agents. You're not, are you?"

I shook my head. "No, just a couple more freelancers."

"Oh! Shoulda known. The way you guys are blending in with the local color. I mean, Flag Girl was bad enough, but you Boat Captain?" Jack scowled at us. "Anyway, whatever's happening here has got nothing to do with that ship."

"Doctor, you want to explain what's happening here, or should I?" I asked quietly, watching his face for any sign of the Oncoming Storm.

The Doctor took the initiative: "Human DNA is being rewritten... by an idiot. I think it's some kind of virus, but I don't know. It's converting human beings into these things but why?" He looked around at all the patients. "What's the point?"

I shuffled over to one of the patients. I made sure not to stand too close but still jumped away in fright when it suddenly sat upright. All the other patients followed suit, calling out "Mummy!" over and over again.

I stumbled back to The Doctor, groping blindly for his hand. He intertwined his fingers with mine, gripping my small hand in his large and calloused one protectively.

"Oh God, I hate this part," I said lowly, bordering on whimpering.

"What's going on?" Jack asked, standing close to us, as well.

The patients got out of their beds. All of them were staring at us.

The Doctor said, "I don't know."

Still calling out "Mummy!", the patients advanced on us. We all backed up toward the doors. The Doctor maneuvered me behind his body, still clutching my hand. "Don't let them touch you," he ordered sternly.

"What happens if they touch us?" Jack asked nervously.

"You're looking at it," The Doctor replied.

I swallowed thickly. My breath was coming in short pants now. The only thing keeping me from bolting out the doors was The Doctor's hand. The gasmask people were getting closer. Their stiff, gaiting walks reminded me of an old horror film.

I really wished The Doctor would hurry up with that epiphany.
"Go to your room." The Doctor's words echoed out, silencing the gasmask people with the stern tone of a very disappointed parent. "Go to your room," he repeated.

The patients stopped moving.

The Doctor glared at them all, snapping, "Go to your room!"

The gasmask people all tilted their head in the same direction, giving him a creepy version of a confused stare.

"I mean it! I am very, very angry with you. I am very, VERY cross! Go. To. Your. ROOM!" he bellowed finally, violently pointing up and to the left with his free hand.

The Doctor, Jack, and I watched with halted breath as each of the gasmask people shuffled around and went back to their individual beds.

The Doctor held his irritated pose until all of them were lying down peacefully. Finally, he sighed, "I'm really glad that worked. Those would've been terrible last words."

I gave a short, delirious giggle.

Jack was sitting in Dr. Constantine's now-abandoned chair with his feet propped up on the table. I had decided not to follow Rose's example of examining the gasmask people. I could see them just fine from my place pressed up against The Doctor with his arm firmly around my waist.

"How was your con supposed to work?" The Doctor asked Jack, trying to fill in the missing pieces of his puzzle.

I was almost disappointed in Jack. He was being so stubborn and still wasn't admitting that this was mostly his fault, however unintentionally it may have been. But I could see where he was coming from. Who wanted to be responsible for this mess? Then there was his lack of knowledge about Chula ambulances to be considered. It was obvious that, had he known more about the 'space junk', he wouldn't have crash landed it in the middle of London during the blitz.

"Simple enough, really." Jack answered. "Find some harmless piece of space-junk, let the nearest Time Agent track it back to Earth, and convince him it's valuable and name a price. When he's put fifty percent up front—oops! A German bomb falls on it, destroys it forever. He never gets to see what he's paid for. Never knows he's been had. I buy him a drink with his own money, and we discuss dumb luck. The perfect self-cleaning con."

The Doctor scoffed. "Yeah. Perfect." He clenched his jaw, attempting to mask the rage that boiled underneath the surface.

Jack started talking again: "The London Blitz is great for self-cleaners. Pompeii's nice if you want to make a vacation of it though. But you've got to set your alarm for Volcano Day." He laughed at his joke.

I cringed, averting my eyes from him while The Doctor continued giving him a blank stare.
Jack's laughter died away. "Getting a hint of disapproval."

I face palmed, groaning irritably. "Oh my God you're stupid." Jack's jaw clenched, and he glowered at me. "Jack!" I hissed, motioning around the room. "Look around. This is what your 'harmless piece of space junk' did."

"It was a burnt-out medical transporter. It was empty," he growled back, staring me down.

His glare didn't ruffle my feathers at all. I just gave him a very bored, unimpressed stare, as if to ask 'Really? You think that's going to work?'.

The Doctor squeezed my hip. "Dahlia."

I slowly peeled my gaze away from Jack, meeting The Doctor's eyes. Sighing, I nodded. "I know. Time to go upstairs."

Jack left his seat, calling out, "I even programmed the flight computer so it wouldn't land on anything living. I harmed no-one!" He continued gravely, "I don't know what's happening here but believe me. I had nothing to do with it."

The Doctor just looked back at him and replied sardonically, "I'll tell you what's happening. You forgot to set your alarm clock. It's Volcano Day."

A siren went off somewhere outside. The Doctor and I walked out of the ward. Jack followed. We walked up a set of stairs until we were greeted by a large, locked metal door.

"Have you got a blaster?" The Doctor asked, looking over his shoulder at Jack.

Jack nodded. "Sure!"

The Doctor continued to watch Jack. "The night your space-junk landed, someone was hurt. This was where they were taken. I want to know what happened. Now get it open."

Jack moved past him, pulling out a gun-like object that had a glowing blue light in the middle and pointing it at the door. The blaster cut a perfect square in the door's lock, causing it to open squeakily.


Jack gave him an interested look. "You've been to the factories?"

Taking the blaster from Jack to examine it better, The Doctor answered shortly, "Once."

"Well, they're gone now, destroyed. Main reactor went critical, vaporized the lot," Jack said dejectedly.

"Like I said. Once." The Doctor handed the blaster back to its owner. "There's a banana grove there now. I like bananas. Bananas are good." Before entering the room, he smiled like it was an everyday thing to hint that you had blown up a weapons factory. Though, for him it probably was.

I snorted at his ridiculousness. Jack frowned at me. Shrugging, I offered, "I'm a bit on the fence about that one. I for one don't see what's so great about bananas." Hesitating just long enough to catch Jack's amused smile, I followed The Doctor inside the room with Jack following close behind.

This was the observation room for Jamie's actual room. The glass window looked like someone
had smashed a brick through it, scattering glass everywhere. Nearly every inch of machinery was
trashed. Broken objects had been flung every which way; there were even a few chairs overturned.

The Doctor looked up from the wreckage over to Jack. "What do you think?"


The Doctor didn't let him off that easily and pressed on, "Yeah. And?"

Jack's stance told me he wanted to roll his eyes. "Something powerful. Angry."

Nodding at the acceptable answer, The Doctor repeated, "Powerful and angry."

Jack and I walked farther into the room, finally entering the room beyond the one we were in. It
was a child's room. There was a small bed, broken and unbroken toys, and every surface available
to a four-year-old was covered in colorful drawings.

Jack frowned and asked, "A child? I suppose this explains the 'Mummy'."

The Doctor, who had been inspecting the equipment behind the glass, flicked the recorder on.
Doctor Constantine's voice broke the silence of the room: "Do you know where you are?"

Jamie responded, "Are you my mummy?"

"Are you aware of what's around you? Can you . . . see?"

"Are you my mummy?"

"What do you want? Do you know—"

"I want my mummy! Are you my mummy? I want my mummy. Are you my mummy?"

I hugged myself to keep the chills at bay. This part was way worse in person. Jamie was just an
innocent child, a powerful, scared child, but innocent nonetheless. He didn't know what he was
doing. He was four for God's sake! Normal four year olds could barely comprehend the world
around them, let alone one whose genetics were rewritten.

Looking at the drawings only succeeded in making me feel worse. Every single one of them was a
different variation of a woman.

"Are you my mummy? Mummy? Mummy?"

I twitched. "Doctor, we've heard that voice before."

"We have."

"Mummy?"

Even though I didn't need to say it, I started rambling, "Always 'are you my mummy?'. Like he
doesn't know." I shivered. "Why doesn't he know?"

"Are you there, Mummy? Mummy?"

The Doctor started pacing. The recorder's reels continued to spin, filling the room with Jamie's
voice. "Mummy? Please, Mummy? Mummy?"
"Can you sense it?" The Doctor asked, his tone showing how stressed he was becoming.

Jack frowned. "Sense what?"

"Coming out of the walls, can you feel it?"

I shuddered. Yes, I could feel it. It wasn't much, just enough that I could feel the despair, confusion, and anger seeping from every one of the drawings and into my skin, chilling me to my core. I felt violated and confused. How could I feel what The Doctor was feeling? I was just a human. I should be confused like Jack.

"Mummy?"

"Funny little human brains, how do you get around in those things?" The Doctor snipped.

To keep my mind off the feelings, I continued saying Rose's lines. "When he's stressed, he likes to insult species," I explained to Jack, giving him a tired smile.

"Dahlia, I'm thinkin'," The Doctor grumbled, still pacing.

I ignored him. "Cuts himself shaving. Does half an hour on life forms he's cleverer than."

"There are these children living rough around the bomb site. They come out during air-raids looking for food," he said, more to himself than to us. He had stopped in front of the broken window and was staring at Jack and me.

"Mummy, please?"

"Suppose they were there when this thing—whatever it was—landed," The Doctor continued.

Jack interrupted, "It was a med-ship. It was harmless."

"Yes, you keep saying that—'harmless'." The Doctor threw a glare at Jack and then looked at me. "Suppose one of them was altered—affected?"

Despite the chills I still felt, I smiled and contributed to The Doctor's train of thought: "Altered how?"

"I'm here!"

Then everything clicked into place in The Doctor's chaotic mind. I could practically hear the clank of machinery as it spun, and the screech as it halted so he could examine his findings. "It's afraid. Terribly afraid and powerful. It doesn't know it yet, but it will do." He laughed anxiously and smiled. "It's got the power of a god, and I just sent it to its room."

Jack swallowed uneasily. "What's that noise?" We all focused more on the crackling sound.

I forced a laugh. "End of the tape. It ran out about thirty seconds ago."

"I'm here now. Can't you see me?"

"I sent it to its room. This is its room," The Doctor choked out, spinning around.

Jamie was standing in the observation room, staring at all of us.

Cocking his head to the side, Jamie asked, "Are you my mummy?" The eyes of the gasmask
seemed to bore right through me as he continued to stare. "Mummy?" The Doctor shifted ever so slightly in front of me to shield me from the child's stare.

Jack inched toward the door and muttered to us, "Okay . . . on my signal . . . make for the door. Now!" He reached for his blaster, only to draw a banana instead and brandish it threateningly at Jamie while his hand rested on The Doctor's shoulder.

I probably shouldn't have laughed, but I did. It had been ridiculous onscreen and was even more ridiculous in real life.

The Doctor grinned and pulled out Jack's blaster. He aimed it at the wall and pulled the trigger, causing an oversized, square hole to appear. "Go! Now! Don't drop the banana!" he ordered.

Since Jack was being slow, I jumped through the hole first, dragging Jack along back his coat. The Doctor followed right after us.

"Why not?!" Jack barked to The Doctor in confusion.

Grinning, he replied cheekily, "Good source of potassium!"

We were in one of the hospital's corridors now. Jack looked like he wanted to punch The Doctor, but when Jamie appeared a few feet from our exit he changed his mind and snatched his blaster back from The Doctor. "Give me that!" he growled, firing the blaster at the square hole and making it rebuild the wall. "Digital rewind," Jack clarified, tossing the banana to The Doctor. Jack praised him reluctantly, "Nice switch."

The Doctor smiled proudly. "It's from the Groves of Villengard. I thought it was appropriate."

"There's really a banana grove in the heart of Villengard, and you did that?" Jack exclaimed incredulously.

I cleared my throat, causing both men to turn to me. "Okay, hate to interrupt, but we should really start running now. That wall won't hold him forever." Right on time, Jamie slammed his tiny fist into the wall we had just exited through, leaving a very sizeable dent.

The Doctor grabbed my hand, yelling, "Come on!" We dashed down a flight of stairs and through a hall, only to quickly retreat back the way we had come when the patients from the medical ward burst from the room. We were back to where we started when another group of gasmask people advanced on us from the opposite direction. The child was still breaking through the wall.

"It's keeping us here so it can get at us!" The Doctor hissed.

Jack whipped back and forth, baffled by which group to use his blaster on. "It's controlling them?"

The Doctor scowled. "It is them. It's every living thing in this hospital."

Jack shifted into military gear immediately. "Okay. This can function as a sonic blaster, a sonic cannon and it's a triple-enfolded sonic disrupter. Doc, whatcha got?"

The Doctor removed the sonic screwdriver from his jacket's pocket, giving a strained glance as he did. Despite the situation, I smirked at his panic. He always has to seem impressive, I thought mockingly.

"A sonic, er . . . Oh, never mind," The Doctor growled.
"What?"

The Doctor faced the second group of gasmask people, moving me behind him and between the two men. "It's sonic, okay? Let's leave it at that."


"It's sonic! Totally sonic! I am sonic-ed up!" Oh God, Doctor, stop the bravado and just tell him!

"A sonic what?!" Fuck you, Jack. You're not supposed to encourage him.

"Screwdriver!" The Doctor finally admitted, shouting the word as if embarrassed by it.

Shocked, Jack whirled around to gape wordlessly at The Doctor, who was making a point of not making eye contact with the conman. Rolling my eyes in exasperation at the two morons, I grabbed Jack's wrist and pointed the blaster at the floor, shouting, "Brace for impact!" The floor disappeared the moment I pulled the trigger, and soon we were a tangled pile of limbs on the hard ground of the floor below the original one.

Jack was the first to move, grabbing his blaster and switching the settings before firing it up at the hole we'd fallen through to remake the ceiling.

I grunted and shifted into a sitting a position. "Everyone all right?"

"Could've used a warning," Jack grumbled, brushing dust off his coat.

I scoffed, "I did give you a warning. Not my problem if you didn't heed it."

Jack ignored me in favor of asking, "Who has a sonic screwdriver?"

The Doctor helped me up and answered indignantly, "I do!"

Rolling my eyes, I shuffled over to the far wall in search of a light switch. I tried to ignore their childish argument over their equipment, but it was a bit difficult when they were snapping at each other like dogs.

"Who looks at a screwdriver and thinks 'Oh, this could be a little more sonic'?"

"What, you've never been bored?"

I nearly stumbled into a desk; fumbling along the wall wasn't really helping.

"Never had a long night? Never had a lot of cabinets to put up?"

Huffing, I mentally smacked myself for being an idiot. I reached into my pocket and pulled out my own sonic screwdriver. Clicking it to the right setting, I turned activated it and the lights immediately flicked on. I regretted the action as soon as I did it. I had forgotten the room was filled with gasmask people, and the light had woken them up. Every single one of them was climbing out of his or her bed, crying out 'Mummy'.

The side door was easily spotted, and we all rushed toward it. Jack tried to use his blaster, but it only gave off a few short crackles of energy before dying. "Damn it!" he snarled.

The Doctor lightly shoved Jack out of the way, using his sonic to unlock the door. Jack smacked the blaster with his hand. "It's the special features, they really drain the battery."
"Note to self, Jack: Reliability trumps flashiness," I said flatly just as The Doctor opened the door.

We all rushed into a large storeroom. Boxes of random stuff littered the entire room. There was only one window, and it was covered in metal bars. Jack peeked out of it, heatedly spitting, "I was gonna send for another one, but somebody's got to blow up the factory." He glared over his shoulder at The Doctor, who was relocking the door.

"Okay, that door should hold a bit," The Doctor said, walking further into the room.

Jack jumped down from where he had been standing. "The door? The wall didn't stop it!"

"Well, it's gotta find us first! Come on, we're not done yet! Assets, assets!" The Doctor barked.

Jack scoffed, "Well, I've got a banana, and at a pinch you could put up some shelves."

Taking out my sonic, I waggled it in front of Jack. "It does a lot more than just put up shelves, dude. Believe me, I know." But I do wish I had brought the laser screwdriver. It would've come in handy against the wall right about now. Though, in retrospect leaving it on the TARDIS was a better idea. Can't risk The Doctor catching a glance at it.

The Doctor ignored Jack's obvious attempt at starting a fight and wandered over to the window to peer outside. "Window?"

Sitting in a wheelchair and smoothing over his irritation by a fraction, Jack recited, "Barred, sheer drop outside. Seven stories."

"And no other exits," I said, crossing my arms over my chest and leaning against a shelf.

Jack snorted and sardonically noted, "Well, the assets conversation went in a flash, didn't it?"

Glaring at him from the corner of my eye, I briefly considered punching him in the face but decided against it. I had the feeling I would be hurt worse than he would.

Just tell your dear Doctor to. He'll be happy to do it for you, Koschei whispered, chuckling darkly. I caught the briefest flash of The Doctor punching Jack as it rolled through my mind and I was sure the thought hadn't been mine. I suppressed my laughter; The Doctor and Jack would think I was crazy if I randomly started giggling.

I've missed you, Koschei. Where have you been? He had been absent for the past two weeks and I had begun to think he'd vanished.

Oh, you know, just wandering around in your head, trying not to pay attention to you two fucking each other at every opportunity, he drawled lazily.

My cheeks flushed slightly as I fazed back into real life. Shut up.

The Doctor was staring at Jack, analyzing him before turning to me with a sour look on his face. "So, where'd you pick this one up, then?"

I opened my mouth to respond but Jack beat me to it: "She was hanging from a barrage balloon. I had an invisible spaceship. I never stood a chance."

The Doctor looked him dead in the eyes and said, "You're right, you didn't." Then he turned back to the window. "Okay. One, we've got to get out of here. Two, we can't get out of here. Have I missed anything?"
Jack took that opportunity to use his teleport, leaving with barely a sound. I huffed slightly, even though I knew he wasn't going to leave us here; he could've at least told us his plan. "Doctor," I called out. "Jack's gone."

He whirled around to stare at the now empty wheelchair.

The Doctor and I hadn't done much since Jack had disappeared. The Doctor had initially given me very sour looks when he sat in the unoccupied wheelchair, obviously upset about something, and I hadn't taken me long to catch on. So, snorting at his childish response, I plopped myself down on his lap and kissed him as roughly and possessively as I could, only pulling away when I desperately needed oxygen.

"Now stop looking at me with that hurt puppy look," I reprimanded him. "I don't like Jack like that. He's just going to be a good friend after this. Understand?"

He barely let out a vague 'Mm-hm' before curling a hand around the back of my neck and pulling me in for another long kiss. I was just contemplating wiggling out of my pants when the old radio behind me crackled to life. Jack's voice came through loud and clear. "Dahlia? Doctor? Can you hear me?"

Making a frustrated noise at the back of my throat, I regretfully slid off The Doctor's lap. He gave me a small smile, pecked my lips, and then stood to inspect the radio. Seconds later, he held up the frayed ends of the radio's wires.

Jack continued on: "I'm back on my ship. Used the emergency teleport. Sorry I couldn't take you. It's security-keyed to my molecular structure. I'm working on it. Hang in there." A whirring noise came from his side of the com.

The Doctor frowned. "How're you speaking to us?"

"Om-Com," Jack supplied easily, the sound of tools being used in the background. "I can call anything with a speaker grill."

The frown turned into an impassive line. "Now there's a coincidence."

"What is?" Jack asked curiously.

"The child can Om-Com, too."

"What, you mean the child can call you?" Jack sputtered incredulously.

Jaime's voice suddenly fizzed from the radio in a very sing-songy voice. "And I can hear you. Coming to find you. Coming to fiiiind you."

I shuddered. Jack spoke up, "Doctor, can you hear that?"

"Loud and clear."

"I'll try to block out the signal. Least I can do."

"Coming to find you, Mummy!"

"Remember this, Dahlia?" Jack chuckled, and the same Glenn Miller ballad from early began to
play through the speakers. *Don't say it, don't say it, don't say it . . .* "Our song," he added teasingly after a moment of silence.

I scowled at the ground. Great. Now I'd have to deal with explaining to The Doctor that didn't mean anything. Thanks, Jack.

I was sitting down in the wheelchair, silently cursing Jack and that stupid Glenn Miller song that was still playing on a loop, silently driving me insane. The Doctor hadn't spoken since Jack had last talked to us and now stood at the window, attempting to resonate concrete.

"You don't think he's coming back, do you?" I asked quietly.

"Wouldn't bet my life," he said snappishly.

"He's coming back."

"Why do you trust him?" he nearly growled, tightening his grip on the sonic.

I rose from my seat. "He saved my life. He didn't have to, and he's a good man, Doctor. Naïve and cocky? Yes, but he isn't a bad person, and you know that." I scowled when The Doctor didn't respond. "This isn't about Jack, is it?" Still no response. Glenn Miller continued to play.

"D'ya like 'im?" The Doctor asked softly.

Groaning, I squeezed the bridge of my nose to fend off a headache. "I like him as a friend, Doctor. I've already told you. You have nothing to worry about."

The muscles in The Doctor's shoulders twitched; he was considering what I was telling him. After a moment of silence, he asked, "What did he mean by this being your song?"

I inched closer to him and sighed tiredly. "A bit after Jack rescued me from the barrage balloon, we went on top of his ship. We each had a glass of champagne, he played this song, we danced for a bit, and we talked business about the Chula ship. It doesn't mean anything. It's just something he's using to tease me."

"You danced with him?"

I mentally face-palmed. Please, feel free to ignore everything I've been rambling about for the past five minutes and single out one insignificant detail. I won't mind at all. "Yes, we swayed back and forth to Glenn Miller, but you know what?"

That did a good job of peaking his interest. Pausing in his work on the concrete, The Doctor half turned to look at me over his shoulder. "What?"

Shuffling forward, I wrapped my arms around his waist and pressed my face into his back, inhaling the wonderful leather scent. "None of it felt right. I kept thinking about Skiliaron Seventy-Four and when we danced," I mumbled, nuzzling his jacket. "And I'm not really Glenn Miller's biggest fan."

The Doctor was quiet for a long while. I was afraid he had decided to just ignore me, but then his arms dropped from where they were still braced against the window. One of his calloused hands came to rest over mine at his front. "Then why the hell is this rubbish still playing?" he snorted, flicking the sonic to the radio. The screwdriver buzzed; Glenn Miller instantly switched to a
familiar song. A classical alien arrangement I had only heard once but would never forget. The Doctor loosened my hold around his waist just enough so that he could turn around and step down from the window.

I grinned and pulled him further away from the window. "May I have this dance?" I asked flirtatiously.

"I really should be resonating concrete," he said half-heartedly, not resisting my insistent tugs.

Snickering, I placed his hands on my waist and mine around his neck, sidling as close to him as humanly possible. "Jack'll be back. He'll get us out. Trust me. The world doesn't end because The Doctor dances."

He returned my grin, tightening his grip on my waist. Swaying to the music, he leaned down to give me a slow kiss. I happily returned it and attempted to quicken its pace but was thwarted when The Doctor nipped my bottom lip as punishment. Refusing to submit, I lightly tugged on his hair, hoping he would take the bait.

Instead, he pulled away and gave me a peck, humming against my lips, "Barrage balloon?"

Pouting, I explained, "Jack has nanogenes in his ship that took care of the rope burn. It wasn't that bad in the first place, so don't look at me like that. And no, the nanogenes aren't as impressive as your Time Lord medicine."

Looking thoroughly pleased, The Doctor leaned in for another kiss, this one fiercer than the last. We had stopped swaying to the music and were just standing there, making out like we weren't trapped in the storeroom of a hospital during World War II while the gasmask child tracked us down.

All in all, pretty good day, you know, besides the nearly dying parts. So, of course The Doctor's hands started wandering. At first it was only a little, just his thumbs making small circles on my hip bones, but then his fingers slipped under my shirt, inching upwards until he was caressing the skin under the edge of my bra. My breath hitched when he stroked the underside of my breast and a moan started low in my throat.

"Most people notice when they've been teleported, not that I blame you two," Jack purred from seemingly nowhere.

The Doctor and I jerked apart, and I mourned the loss of his hands on my skin. We both gave Jack dirty looks; I couldn't make mine as angry as I wanted to once I caught the way Jack was eyeing both of us. I was suddenly reminded of what I had told Jack. Would I really ask The Doctor about a threesome? Should I? Did I even want a threesome? I wasn't sure about anything concerning that topic right now. And frankly, this wasn't the time or place to think about it.

"...Nav-Com offline to override the teleport security," Jack carried on, leaning under his chair to search through a compartment, muttering something about needing five minutes.

The Doctor scanned the ship's interior. "This is a Chula ship."

"Yeah, just like the medical transporter," Jack called out to us. He popped up from what he was doing to give us a stern look. "Only this one is dangerous."

Snapping his fingers, The Doctor held out his hands, which were immediately covered in glowing nanogenes. "Sub-atomic robots. There's millions of them in here, see? Burned my hand on the console when we landed... all better now. They activate when the bulkheads sealed. Check you
out for damage, fix any physical flaws." The Doctor waved the nanogenes away, sending Jack a glare. "Take us to the crash site. I need to see your 'space junk'."

Jack rolled his eyes, making a face as if The Doctor were a nagging wife. "As soon as I get the Nav-Com back online." He shrugged off The Doctor's second glare. "Make yourselves comfortable. Hell, carry on with what you were doing for all I care." Jack's eyes glanced over to me. "If I can't join in, I still love to watch." I blushed hotly, knowing exactly what he was referring to and trying to banish thoughts of Jack watching The Doctor and I. It was more of a turn on than I cared to admit.

The Doctor tried to play it off. "We were dancing."


Turning to me, The Doctor shrugged helplessly. Still blushing, I looked down at the floor, scuffing my shoes against the metal grating and willing the awkward arousal away.

Jack was still working on his Nav-Com, had been for the past five minutes. The Doctor and I were leaning against opposite sides of the ship in silence.

"He offered you sex," The Doctor muttered darkly.

Blinking, I came out of my trance. "Hm?"

Face twisted into a grimace, he clarified, "The captain. He offered you sex when you two first met. Most likely when you were dancing on top of this ship."

I sighed gloomily and prayed this wouldn't be a shouting match. "Yes, he did."

"And?" he growled, threatening the floor with a painful death.

"I turned him down."

The Doctor snapped his head up to snag me with a suspicious look. "No, you didn't. If you had, then he wouldn't have made that comment earlier about 'watching if he couldn't join in'."

"At first he offered me sex, yes, but then he . . . well, after I told him I was already taken, I thought he was implying a . . . threesome," I offered softly, unable to meet The Doctor's eyes out of embarrassment.

I heard rather than saw his jaw fall open and then close with a clack. A few more seconds of silence and then: "Threesome?"

I nodded.

"And you thought about it?"

Another nod.

He cleared his throat. "Do you want one? With him? Is that what you want?"

I made a frustrated noise and glared irritably off to the side. "I don't know! I haven't even really thought about it, just the odd little thought here and there. I didn't even give Jack a straight answer,
just that I'd have to talk it out with you first before deciding anything."

The Doctor perked up at that. "Really?" he asked. "You were going to ask me?"

I scoffed, "Of course, I was! Do you really think I'd cheat on you? Yes, I thought about it, and yes, a part of me does want it, but I won't do anything that compromises our relationship. I care about you and what we have too much to throw it away like that." My expression softened and I shifted uncomfortably. "A little faith would be nice," I mumbled almost too quiet to be heard.

"I'm sorry, love," The Doctor whispered, moving forward to cradle me close to his chest. I accepted his embrace gratefully.

"I don't mean to doubt you, I really don't. It's just . . . you're the first person I've felt this way for in a long time, and I'm paranoid that everyone who looks at you with even the slightest interest is gonna steal you away from me," The Doctor mutters into my hair, squeezing me just a bit tighter as if to will away the gloominess of his tone. "I mean, why would ya want me when ya can have someone like Jack? He's closer to your age, attractive, and he's not boring, though he is kind of an arse."

Cuddling closer to his warmth, I sighed tiredly. "Okay, let's get a few things out of the way. One, I will never, ever leave you for someone else, especially not for some petty reason like age or attractiveness level. If I suddenly do decide to leave, you should immediately believe something's wrong with me and begin a thorough analysis for mind control.

"Second, I've practically sold my soul to you anyway, so you should stop worrying all the damn time. And third, let's both promise to get all the facts before we jump to conclusions. Getting angry at each other never turns out well. All we do is scream at each other." I waited for The Doctor's input, taking the time to inhale his soothing scent. Unsurprisingly, my headache was mollified by the intoxicating aroma.

"I can agree to those terms," he said, obviously smiling. "And thank you for dealing with me. I know it's not easy dealing with a paranoid Time Lord."

"You're welcome, Theta."

We had both forgotten where we were, which was made even clearer when we both jumped at the sound of Jack's voice. "Okay, we're ready to go."

Jack hadn't commented on the conversation he had surely overheard. He had only been a few feet away so he must have heard the entire thing. It's not like we had been particularly quiet; even our whispers had been blatantly obvious. In the end, it didn't matter. I was just grateful he wasn't making cheap jokes and seemed to actually understand that the conversation was meant to be private, even if it concerned him.

We were rushing through the railway station now, weaving in and around the stagnant trains. We ducked behind a crate; the barbed wire surrounded bombsite was visible from our hidden position.

Jack took one look at the main guy and let out a chuckle. "Hey, they've got Algy on duty. Must be important."

The Doctor snorted impatiently. "We gotta get past him."
"Alright, Jack, work your 51st Century magic, and try not to drag it out too long. Some of us wouldn't like to be here all night watching you talk about dancing," I casually ordered, making a slight waving motion in his direction with my hand.

Jack grinned and stood. "I'll make sure to use my most successful techniques." He began walking toward the guard, waving back at us. "Don't wait up."

The Doctor leaned closer and whispered to me, breath fanning over my ear, "This would be the perfect opportunity to observe if he's as good as he wants us to believe he is."

I froze and slowly turned to face him. "Are you seriously trying to discuss the threesome idea when we're trying to get into a military guarded site?"

He shrugged, grinning slyly.

"I thought you wouldn't like the idea."

"Now that I know you won't do anything without my input, I think we should give it serious thought before simply saying no."

I scowled, barking, "We are not talking about this now."

With a mischievous, very unmanly giggle, The Doctor turned his attention back to Jack, who was doing as I had ordered and seducing the sick-looking head guard. As if on some sort of cue, Algy let out a ragged cough and fell to his knees. Bile swelled in my throat as Algy's face slowly morphed into a gasmask. Jack stumbled backwards, staring at the man in horror. Several soldiers saw what had happened and, shouting in surprise, started rushing over. The Doctor snapped at them, "Stay back!"

Jack backed him up. "You men, stay back!"

The Doctor and I rushed to Jack's side. Algy was lying motionless on the ground. The Doctor didn't pause. "The effect's become air-borne. Accelerating."

"What's keeping us safe?" Jack asked fearfully.

"Nothing." The Doctor answered bluntly.

Well, no one could ever accuse him of lying to make people feel better.

The air raid siren started wailing.

I huffed, "Great, just fuckin' great. Just what we need." I turned to Jack. "You did say a bomb was gonna land here, didn't you?"

While Jack nodded in confirmation, The Doctor dismissed the useless information easily. "Never mind about that. If the contaminant's airborne now, there's hours left."

Jack frowned. "'Til what?"

"'Til nothing. Forever. For the entire human race. And can anyone else hear singing?" The Doctor spouted, cocking his head in the direction of the singing.

We didn't hesitate to open up the shed where the singing was coming from. Nancy was there, handcuffed to the table with a gasmask person seemingly asleep. The Doctor silently told Nancy to keep singing. She did as she was told, the tears that had slowly been leaking from her eyes stopped
even if she was still afraid.

"Rock-a-by baby," Nancy sang, jerking her handcuffed wrists and giving The Doctor a pleading look. "... on the treetops, when the wind blows the cradle will rock."

Brandishing his sonic, The Doctor moved toward her and kneeled. The sonic whirred, and the handcuffs clicked open. He helped Nancy stand. Then, the four of us quickly exited the tent, leaving the napping guard. From there we made our way to the bombsite, where Jack and The Doctor hurriedly removed the tarp uncovering the Chula med ship as enormous floodlights lit up the entire area. I climbed on top of the ship, wanting to observe as much as possible. Nancy hovered around the side of the ship, seeming to not know what to do with herself.

"You see? Just an ambulance," Jack insisted stubbornly.

Nancy asked a question, and I felt rather than heard myself answer it; my lips moved and my tongue formed the sounds, but all I heard was the fading scream of the siren and the soft buzz of what I knew to be nanogenes in the air. How could I hear them? Could The Doctor hear them? I didn't understand ...

Jack messed with the controls of the ship. "They've been trying to get in."

The Doctor scoffed, "Of course they have." His eyes scanned over Jack's hands as they entered a code into the control panel. "They think they've got their hands on Hitler's latest weapon. What're you doing?"

"The sooner you see this thing is empty, the sooner you'll see I had nothing to do with it," Jack spat, barely sparing The Doctor a glance.

The array of controls then took a few precious seconds to shower Jack with sparks and give the rest of us heart attacks by exploding. I nearly fell off the ship's roof, barely managing to get my balance back in time to stop myself from careening over the edge headfirst. The blaring alarm didn't help matters in the slightest.

"Didn't happen last time," Jack growled between clenched teeth.

The Doctor gave him an incredulous look, like that was the worst possible thing he could've said in the entire universe. While he continued to do that, I stole his line: "It didn't crash last time. There'll be emergency protocols."

A red alarm started blaring. The gates began to rattle and shake.

"Captain, secure those gates," The Doctor ordered.

"Why?" Oh my God, Jack, why are you being difficult? We might die and you're being difficult. Why're you being difficult?

"For fuck's sake, Jack, just do it!" I barked, jumping down from the ship to the ground. Pulling out my sonic, I fiddled with the settings and calmly looked into the equally calm Nancy's eyes. "Where did you come in through?"

She jerked her head in the correct direction. "Over there, I cut the wire."

"Show me."

The Doctor didn't question or offer me advice. A large swell of pride bubbled over in my chest,
threatening to stop my breathing. I wouldn't have minded if it had. The Doctor trusted me to get the job done and do it right. I wonder if he knew what that meant to me.

The grin he tossed me said he did.

"It's empty, look at it," Jack said victoriously after he opened the ship's hatch.


I folded my arms over my chest, answering simply, "Nanogenes."

"It wasn't empty, Captain. There was enough nanogenes in there to rebuild a species," The Doctor told Jack.

Jack went incredibly pale and choked on his own spit. Stumbling back, he gasped out in horror, "Oh, God . . ."

The Doctor's voice was grim and coldly condescending. "Getting it now, are we? When the ship crashes, the nanogenes escape. Billions upon billions of them, ready to fix all the cuts and bruises in the whole world. But what they find first is a dead child, probably killed earlier that night and wearing a gasmask."

Nancy gave The Doctor a stunned look. "They . . . they can do that? Bring someone back to life?"

The Time Lord rolled his eyes. "What's life? Life's easy. A quirk of matter. Nature's way of keeping meat fresh. Nothing to a nanogene. One problem, though. These nanogenes, they're not like the ones on your ship. This lot have never seen a human being before. Don't know what a human being's supposed to look like," he said angrily.

Even though I had heard this speech before, I was just as captivated at Jack and Nancy were.

"All they've got to go on is one little body, and there's not a lot left. But they carry right on. They do what they're programmed to do. They patch it up. Can't tell what's gasmask and what's skull, but they do their best. Then off they fly, off they go, work to be done. 'Cause you see, now they think they know what people should look like and it's time to fix all the rest. And they won't ever stop. They won't ever, ever stop. The entire human race is gonna be torn down and rebuilt in the form of one terrified child looking for its mother. And nothing in the world can stop it!" he finished, shouting bitterly at the end. The glare he caught Jack in could've killed an entire legion of Daleks.

Jack took the wrong path, deciding to defend himself instead of ask for forgiveness. "But I didn't know!"

I didn't follow The Doctor's example. Jack wouldn't respond to anger, not matter how justified. So, fixing the conman with a neutral stare, I said, "That doesn't matter. What's done is done and all we can do is try to fix it. Now stop acting like a child and help us."

Neither Jack nor The Doctor seemed keen on letting it go, but both finally relented and started examining the inside of the ship. The Doctor kept impatiently flipping through the sonic's many settings.
Nancy wasn't paying the warring men any attention; she was watching the distant fencing where the gasmask people were gathering. They were all screaming 'Mummy', just like before.

"Dahlia?" Nancy called out to me in fright.

I stepped up to her side and frowned. The gasmask people were slowly making their way over the railway tracks to us. They were far off in the distance, but anytime they were in sight was too close.

Nancy turned to look back at the ship and its flashing red console. "It's drawing them here, isn't it?"

I nodded. "The ship thinks it's under attack. It's calling up the troops. Standard protocol."

She frowned and narrowed her eyes at me. "But they aren't troops."

I sighed and leaned against the med-ship's side. "They are now." I examined my own sonic as I explained, "This is a battlefield ambulance. The nanogenes don't just fix you up. They get you ready for the front line. Equip you, program you. That's what they're made for."

"That's why the child's so strong? Why it could use the Om-Com?" It was Jack who had asked this time.

"He's a fully equipped Chula warrior, yes. All that weapons tech in the hands of a hysterical four-year-old looking for his mummy, and now there's an army of them," I answered from memory.

Now completely surrounding the fenced in area, the gasmask people paused, still calling out 'Mummy'.

Jack asked, "Why don't they attack?"

The Doctor didn't pause whatever he was doing. "Good little soldiers. Waiting for their commander."

"The child?" was Jack's surprised exclamation.

"Jamie," Nancy quietly rebutted, keeping her eyes on the crowd.

"What?" Jack asked, his eyebrows furrowing.

"Not 'the child'," she snapped, whirling around to glare at him. "Jamie."

From the corner of my eye I saw The Doctor tilt his head and watch her, the glint in his eye giving away that he had an idea forming. His eyes flickered to me for confirmation, but I stayed quiet. He could figure it out for himself.

"So," I cleared my throat, "how long until the bomb falls?"


The Doctor glared at Jack, passing the conman to get to Nancy. "What's the matter, Captain? Bit close to the volcano for you?" he spat.

Nancy wrapped her arms around herself, staring into the distance as if trying to make sense of the entire situation. "He's just a little boy."

"I know," The Doctor comforted.
"He's just a little boy who wants his mummy," she continued, her voice starting to quiver.

"I know. There isn't a little boy born who wouldn't tear the world apart to save his mummy. And this little boy can," he murmured back.

"What're we going to do?"

"I don't know."

Nancy sniffled, blinking tears out of her eyes. "It's my fault."

"No," he murmured comfortingly to her.

"It is. It's all my fault," she choked out.

He smiled empathetically. "How can it be your—" The gasmask people's voices rose in volume, cutting The Doctor off. He snapped around to stare at them. I could see the cogs turn in his head as he connected the pieces between Nancy's guilt and little Jamie. He turned to me, eyes wide and searching for confirmation, desperate to know he wasn't making a mistake.

I tilted my head toward him just enough so he could see me nod. A small smile broke his tense expression and he turned back to Nancy. "Nancy, what age are you? Twenty? Twenty-one? Older than you look, yes?"

Nearby, a bomb crashed to the ground. We all jerked at the sound. Jack's voice shook as he spoke, "Doctor—that bomb. We've got seconds." Another bomb fell, this one closer than the first.

I let his terrified statement hang in the air for several long seconds before acknowledging where I knew his mind was lingering. "We know you can't take us with you, Jack," I said apathetically. "It's Volcano Day. Do what ya gotta do." I gave him an unimpressed look over my shoulder.

"I-I'm sorry," Jack appealed. "The Nav-Com's back online. It would take too long to override it again."

I shrugged and turned back to The Doctor and Nancy. This time I heard him teleport away.

The Doctor glanced at me caringly, reaching over to clasp my shoulder. "Are you okay?"

Placing my hand on top of his, I reassured him, "I'm fine. He's coming back anyway, so there's no need to be upset."

Rolling his eyes, The Doctor scoffed, "I highly doubt that."

I smirked. "I didn't know you knew the future, Doctor. Perhaps you should enlighten me as to how this all ends."

He grinned and kissed my cheek. "I have a theory." Then he whipped back around to Nancy. "How old were you five years ago? Fifteen? Sixteen? Old enough to give birth, anyway."

Still sobbing quietly, Nancy glanced at him before quickly looking away in shame.

"He's not your brother, is he?" The Doctor urged.

She nodded, clutching her arms around her body.

"A teenage single mother in 1941. So you hid. You lied."
Again, she nodded.

"You even lied to him," The Doctor murmured.

The gates swung open with identical shrieks. Jamie led his makeshift army through the gates with the soft, unassuming battle cry of, "Are you my mummy?"

"He's gonna keep asking, Nancy. He's never gonna stop. Tell him," The Doctor insisted, staring at Nancy with the most understanding eyes I had ever seen. A knot welled in my throat along with tears in my eyes, not in jealousy, but because I could see how desperate he was getting. He wanted this day to end happily. He wanted that more than anything in the word right now, and it broke my heart to know how few days like this there would be.

"Nancy, the future of the human race is in your hands. Trust me . . . and tell him." Nancy didn't seem to be paying attention, only continuing to stare miserably at Jamie as he marched toward us, so The Doctor lightly pushed her forward.

Jamie stared at Nancy. "Are you my mummy?"

Choking down her sobs, Nancy whispered, "Yes." It was almost too soft to hear but then she added, more firmly, "Yes. I am your mummy." She finally faced him, her jaw set in determination, even if tears still slipped down her cheeks.

Tiny Jamie took several steps toward her. "Mummy?" he asked eagerly.

"I'm here," Nancy cooed.

Whatever recognition that had been there faded from Jamie's voice. "Are you my mummy?"

Nancy kneeled in front of her son. "I'm here."

"Are you my mummy?"

"Yes."

The Doctor looked at the mother and son miserably and resignedly commented, "He doesn't understand. There's not enough of him left."

I didn't say anything, just watched and listened to Nancy try to convince Jamie of who she was. "I am your mummy. I will always be your mummy. I'm so sorry," she insisted, hugging Jamie close to her body.

I didn't realize I was holding my breath until I saw both of them glow with a golden light. Letting out the air in a whoosh of relief, I excitedly turned to watch The Doctor's reaction.

He warily glanced at me, but the suspicion immediately faded when a grin spread across my face that was soon mirrored by one of his own. Whipping back to Nancy and Jamie, he eagerly muttered, "Come on, please. Come on, you clever little nanogenes. Figure it out! The mother. She's the mother! There's gotta be enough information. Figure it out!"

An individual nanogene floated above the others, brighter than the rest. "It's recognizing the DNA," I whispered in awe. Nancy swayed briefly before collapsing; the nanogene cloud vanished. The Doctor and I rushed to Nancy and Jamie's sides. The Doctor was staring down at Jamie with eyes that glimmered with hope, and praying under his breath, the same thing over and over: "Oh, come on. Give me a day like this. Give me this one." The Doctor grasped the gasmask and tugged
on it, easily removing it and revealing the confused child underneath. Grinning ecstatically, The Doctor lifted Jamie high over his head, causing him to giggle happily. He hugged Jamie to him in a near bone-crushing hug. "Ah-ha-ha! Welcome back! Twenty years 'til pop music. You're gonna love it."

Kneeling beside Nancy to help her up, I nearly choked on the knot in my throat when I realized how much The Doctor looked like a celebrating father . . . and how much I liked that idea.

"What happened?" Nancy asked in confusion and astonishment, not taking her eyes off of Jamie as she stumbled to her feet.

"The nanogenes recognized the superior information. The parent DNA. They didn't change you because you changed them!" Handing Jamie to Nancy, The Doctor gripped my hand and jerked me toward him until I was completely pressed against him. "Mother knows best!" he chirped before capturing my mouth in a kiss that stole the air from my lungs in the greatest way possible.

I was panting when we broke apart and licked our mixed saliva off my lips before gasping out, "And of course the bomb's taken care of, thanks to psychology."

He grinned flirtatiously. "Yes, it is."

I didn't need to look to see the bomb hurling toward us. I also didn't need to look to see it be snatched up in glowing force field, but I did anyway.

Jack lurched into view, straddling the bomb. "Doctor!" he called out.

"Good lad!" The Doctor shouted back, still clutching me close to him.

"The bomb's already commenced detonation," Jack informed us urgently. "I've put it in stasis, but it won't last long."

The Doctor beamed. "Change of plan! Don't need the bomb. Can you get rid of it? Safely as you can."

Jack nodded, and by the set of his jaw, I could tell he had decided what he was going to do, even if it would cost him his own life. "Dahlia?"

I removed myself from The Doctor and edge closer to Jack, beaming up at him. "Don't worry, Jack. We'll see each other again sooner than you think, so don't get too down."

He gave me a sad smile, and I knew he thought he was going to die soon. Grin still firmly in place, I said, "You worry too much, Jack." Jack shook his head and disappeared. He didn't reappear to comment on my shirt. I didn't exactly know how to feel about that.

Movement caught my eye. The Doctor was gazing at his hands, which glowed with summoned nanogenes. Nancy watched him from over the top of Jamie's head with a puzzled expression.

"What're you doing?"

The Doctor slowly walked toward the crowded gasmask people. "Software patch. Gonna e-mail the upgrade!" Flinging his hands outwards, The Doctor scattered the nanogenes at them; the gasmask people were surrounded by the robots and collapsed to the ground as the nanogenes began repairing their DNA.

The Doctor grinned at me like a child at Christmas. The pure happiness he exuded made me mirror
his grin until my face started hurting, and even then I couldn't stop.

"Everybody lives, Dahlia. Just this once. Everybody lives!" he exclaimed, jerking me forward again for another fierce kiss.

The patients stood, all of them looking around and asking questions in confusion. In a shining cloud, the nanogenes flew off to the rest of London to (hopefully) repair the damage to the rest of the population.

The Doctor pulled me along over to Dr. Constantine. "Doctor Constantine, who never left his patients. Back on your feet, constant doctor! World doesn't wanna get by without you just yet, and I don't blame it one bit." Pausing to make a sweeping gesture to the cured patients, he said, "These are your patients. All better now."

Constantine gave a puzzled look around at everyone and their surroundings and replied, "Yes, yes . . . so it seems. They also seem to be standing around in a disused railway station. Is there any particular reason for that?"

The Doctor shrugged his confusion off with a grin. "Yeah, well, you know, cutbacks. Listen, whatever was wrong with them in the past, you're probably gonna find that they're cured. Just tell them what a great doctor you are. Don't make a big thing of it. Okay?" He bound back to the med ship and climbed on top of it. "Right, you lot! Lots to do! Beat the Germans. Save the world. Don't forget the Welfare State!"

Dr. Constantine, ceasing his herding of his patients, glanced over his shoulder at The Doctor, furrowing his eyebrows. "What's he doing?"

"Setting this to self-destruct, soon as everybody's clear. History says there was an explosion here. Who are we to argue with history?" I answered, smiling cheekily.

The Doctor laughed boisterously, continuing to reprogram the Chula ship's console. "Usually we're the first in line!"
After a few seconds of silence, he said quietly, earnestly, "Everybody lives." He immediately turned to the console and wildly started pressing buttons and pulling levers. I rushed to the opposite side to help. The TARDIS' engines flared up and minutes later, we were on Jack's ship. I didn't hesitate to throw the door open and call out, "Well? Hurry up!" I returned to The Doctor, who was eagerly waiting to practice dancing with me. Moonlight Serenade played softly from a speaker on the console.

Jack burst through the open door in record time; he skidded to a stop on the ramp and his mouth fell open in shock at the TARDIS' interior.

The Doctor snorted, "Jack! Shut the door! Your ship is about to blow up, there's going to be a draft!" Then, he attempted to spin me around, but we ended up getting tangled together and not in a comfortable way.

"Okay, okay!" I winced, twitching my shoulder to try and relieve the pressed. The Doctor released me immediately. "Let's try this again and this time, no half-nelsons."

The Doctor scowled, stepping to the console to program our new destination. "I'm sure I used to know this stuff."

I rolled my eyes. "Well don't look at me for help. The best dancing I've ever done is swaying in a circle or side to side."

"Welcome to the TARDIS," The Doctor greeted Jack.

"I'm impressed. It's much bigger on the inside."

"You'd better be," I smirked. "And you mean she."

Jack frowned. "She?"

The Doctor answered for me, "The TARDIS is sentient, ergo—she."

Laughing, Jack joined us at the console. "So," he drawled, raising both eyebrows. "TARDIS? Does that stand for something?"

"Time And Relative Dimensions In Space." I smirked.

"This is a spaceship and a time machine?" Jack asked in amazement. "That's . . ."

"Impressive?"

Jack smirked. "Very impressive."

The Doctor paused. He sent me a look over the console before shrugging. "I guess he isn't so bad."
I was in the library, sitting at the edge of the pool and dangling my feet in while I reread *Jurassic Park* for the thirtieth time while Koschei ran a commentary on the book’s incorrect science. The only sounds were the water lapping at the pool's sides and the now ever-present hum of the TARDIS in my ears, her consciousness brushing against mine every so often to test how strong and permanent the newfound connection was. I didn't know when I started feeling her or how, but it just felt natural. Perhaps I was more sensitive than humans from this dimension, or it might be caused by something a lot more complicated and scientific. In the end, it didn't matter; I didn't care.

One of the grandiose double doors creaked open just when I got to the part when the T-Rex was breaking out of its enclosure and hunting the humans in its way. Blinking rows of tiny words out of my vision, I looked up towards my new company. I thought it would be The Doctor joining me briefly to grab an actual manual on how to properly fix whatever it was he had been working on for the past two hours, but Jack's head peaked inside instead.

"Oh, hey, Dahlia," Jack said cheerfully, flashing me a wide grin. "I didn't know you were in here."

Using a bookmark to keep my place, I closed my book as Jack approached. "Yeah, I didn't want to mess with The Doctor and his latest project. He gets irritated if something doesn't cooperate within the first half hour."

Jack tugged off his boots and socks and rolled up his pants before plopping down next to me and dipping his feet into the water. "I'm with you there. Ran into him a little while ago and asked if he needed help, and let me tell you, I'm never doing that again," he grumbled.

I laughed. "Probably should've warned you about that. So, what're you doing here?"

Jack shrugged. "Wandering around, trying to find out where everything is."

Wrinkling my nose in amusement, I snickered, "Oh, good luck with that. I've tried to do that a few times and only succeeded in getting myself lost. Now if I need to find something I just ask the TARDIS for help."

"The TARDIS?" Jack asked, bemused.

"Yep. You won't actually be able to hear her speak since she exists on several dimensional planes, but she'll make the lights on the floor blink and point you in the right direction," I explained.

"Huh," Jack furrowed his eyebrows. "Didn't know that."

Silence fell over us. Jack lightly kicked his feet, causing ripples to jolt the surface of the otherwise calm pool. I stared awkwardly down at my lap and fiddled with my book. Should I tell him now? It's the best opportunity I've gotten in a long time, and besides, he does deserve to know. It's not like he can't handle it. He's Captain Jack Harkness for God's sake!

"Jack," I started, sighing heavily. "There's something I need to tell you."

He chuckled. "Ugh. I knew this was coming." He turned to me and gave me a friendly smile. "Dahlia, it's alright, I already know, and I just want you to know, you don't have to feel bad. I saw this coming a mile away."
Twisting my face in confused uncertainty, I gave Jack a doubtful look. "Um . . . Jack, I don't think __" 

"Dahlia, please, I'm a big boy. I can handle it," Jack soothed me, laying a hand on my shoulder. "And like I said, I saw this coming. The Doctor's been giving me Back The Hell Off signals ever since I stepped on board. Don't get me wrong, he's been much more polite than I thought he'd be, but I'm not stupid. I know how to take a hint." He squeezed my shoulder, as if to punctuate his words, and continued, "You guys are my friends, and I can plainly see that you both care about each other a lot, even though your relationship is new. I'm not gonna throw a hissy fit just because I can't have sex with you two."

Smiling and chuckling, I squeezed the hand Jack still had on my shoulder. "Uh, thank you, Jack, but, um, that's . . . not what I wanted to talk to you about."

Jack frowned. Slowly retracting his hand and setting it in his lap, he asked, "Really? Then what is it? Must be pretty serious."

"It is. Serious, I mean." I paused to take a deep breath, looking away from Jack to the crystal clear pool. I placed my book at my side. "Jack, what I'm about to tell you might seem a bit farfetched, but it's the truth. I need to know that you'll give me a chance to explain before you start calling me crazy."

"I'm traveling on a ship called a TARDIS that's an infinite amount of rooms crammed inside a blue box," Jack scoffed. "I don't think it can get much crazier than that."

I laughed half-heartedly. "Yeah, well, I wouldn't be so sure about that."

"Well, I promise to let you explain," he assured me, motioning for me to start. "So . . ."

Deciding it would be best to do this as quickly as possible, I blurted out, "I'm from another dimension."

Jack didn't say anything at first, but then a very intelligent 'Uhhh' sound made its way out of his gaping mouth.

"I know, I know. It sounds crazy, but it's true," I continued. "I was kidnapped from my dimension—by someone I can't name—and brought here to complete a part of the timeline that hadn't happened. That part of the timeline hadn't happened because the person who was supposed to become The Doctor's companion died before any of it could happen, so it basically made the entire dimension collapse in on itself. I'm here to make sure the event happens and this dimension survives."

Jack blinked slowly, opening and closing his mouth while he fought for something to say. "Wow," he finally sputtered. "That's . . . that's, uh, quite the burden to bear."

I shrugged. "I guess. I don't really see it that way. All I really have to do is make sure everything goes the way it should, maybe improve it a bit."

"Improve it?"

"You know, help some people not die, try and simplify things. I haven't been too good at that, though. I keep forgetting the little things, and those're normally the most important parts."

"If it's any consolation, I think you're doing an awesome job so far."
I laughed. "You haven't even been with us a week! How could you know how well I've been handling this?"

"Well, you two are still alive so I take it that you've been doing okay," Jack chuckled.

That made me laugh again. "Yeah. Yeah, I guess it hasn't been as bad as I think it is."

Jack paused for a moment, sucking on his teeth for a few seconds and staring into space as if mentally rolling his next words around in his head. I let him do so. I recognized the look from the numerous times it had crossed The Doctor's face; those times had mostly happened when he and I were talking about how much I could and could not reveal about the future, and I found it best to just leave the other person be while they muddled through their own thoughts. It saved a lot of unnecessary misconceptions, arguments, and hurt feelings in the end.

"Alright, so if you're from another dimension," Jack said, "that means you know what's going to happen, right?"

I nodded and fought to keep the grim look I wanted to express at bay. The queasiness in my stomach conveyed just how much I didn't like where this conversation was going.

"So can you . . . ?" he trailed off uncertainly.

"I can't tell you anything about your future or the future in general," I stated firmly. "Please don't push for information. The Doctor and I have had enough fights about that, and I'd rather just not go through it with you, too."

"I understand." The answer slid easily off of Jack's tongue. "Sorry for bringing up a sore subject."

I waved off his apology. "No, no, it's fine. I understand why you asked. Thank you, though, for not being angry."

He shrugged. "It would be arrogant of me to believe I have to the right be angry. It isn't your job to tell me the future. It's actually your job to keep it from me."

Letting his words trail off, I kicked at the water around my feet. "Do you really think I'm doing a good job?"

"Yeah. Why wouldn't I?"

"It's just . . . I feel like if I stray too far from how things are supposed to go, things will just get too warped, and this dimension will go down the toilet anyway, but I also hate going by the book so much. It makes me feel like I'm just in the other girl's shoes, going through the motions, like I'm just her . . . replacement." I swallowed thickly. "Which is basically how this is, but I just . . ."

"What?" Jack barked angrily, causing me to just in shock and stare at him wide eyed. "Dahlia, how can you ever think you're someone's replacement?"

Jaw dropping, I stuttered, "B-but I'm here—"

"Yeah, you're here to do her job, but that doesn't mean you're just some replacement. There might be some actions you have to stick by, but the rest is up to you. This isn't the story of whoever was supposed to be here. You're here, not her. This is your story," Jack lectured.

The silence that followed was deafening; it rang in my ears like the TARDIS' shrieks when The Doctor did something ridiculously stupid. Taking an unstable breath, I finally breathed out, "Sorry,
Jack . . . I'll try to do that in the future."

He kept his jaw firm. "Good."

The next silence was uncomfortable, the tension from Jack's outburst still rolling of him and into the air. I was fighting not to bodily squirm in place or rub the goose bumps from my arms. Jack cleared his throat.

"So, uh, why exactly is there a swimming pool in the library?" he asked awkwardly, glancing at me from the side.

I laughed softly and tilted my head back. "I don't really know. I've never thought to ask."

A few days later, The Doctor and I were in the kitchen. He was on his third cup of strong tea and I was attempting to make a cake without eating all the batter, which I was failing miserably at. I had already slurped down three spoonfuls of chocolate deliciousness and was contemplating telling the TARDIS to make another one on her own so I could have this one to myself. The Doctor had initially teased me for it, but a few candy sweet kisses changed his mind.

I was in the middle of being telepathically scolded by the TARDIS when The Doctor cleared his throat.

"Dahlia, can I ask you something?"

The tension in his voice immediately alerted me to just how awkward he felt. And was that fear in his tone? It sounded like it, and all those horrible emotions mixed together never bode well for our conversations.

". . . I guess so," I responded quietly, setting the spoon I had been stirring the cake batter with down on the glowing orange countertop.

He took a deep breath before blurting out, "Why are you with me?"

"What?"

"Why," his voice quivered, "are you with me? Is it because you really want to be? Or is that how the story goes?"

His words slammed into my gut like a wrecking ball, causing my knees to wobble dangerously and forcing me to hold myself up with the counter. I didn't know what to say. What could I say to that? The Doctor was asking me if I was only with him because that was what I was supposed to do! What the ever loving fuck?!

I whirled around furiously, anger burning bright. "How could you ask that?!"

The Doctor didn't look at me, instead focusing on the tabletop.

"Answer me!" I snarled. "What would make you think that? Do you really think I would manipulate you like that for the sake of a timeline? I didn't think I came off as that aloof and untrustworthy, Doctor."

"Dahlia, no!" The Doctor lurched out of his chair, shoving off the table and causing it to skid along the tile floor. "I just—you come here and from the first moment, you tell me you're here to keep
the universe intact, to follow the storyline. You've gone through a lot of trouble to keep it that way . . . and no, I'm not trying to start another argument about that. I know you do what you do and keep the secrets that you keep for a reason and I'm done questioning it.

"I know you care about me. Don't ever think for a second that I doubt that." He inhaled sharply and exhaled slowly. "What I'm trying to ask is . . . did you plan on our relationship happening because it happened between Rose and me in your universe?"

I wanted to scream at him. I wanted to throw things. I wanted to curse and shout. I wanted to cry and beg him how he could ever think that. Instead, I hissed, "No, I didn't. In fact, in my universe, the relationship between you and Rose was never properly defined. There were hints and you guys kissed a few times, once while she was possessed, but it was never shown that you two were actually together. So no, I'm not doing this because I believe that I have to. I'm with you because I want to be. Does that answer your question?"

Gritting my teeth in an effort not to bare them at The Doctor, I stormed toward the kitchen doors. The Doctor grasped my arm to stop me.

"Let go!" I snapped, turning around to glare at him. "I'm not going to stay here and be second guessed by you."

"Dahlia, please, listen for just a moment, please," he pleaded, encircling me with his arms to keep me close to his body and effectively stopping me from leaving.

After a short struggle that was mostly just me uselessly tugging at The Doctor's hold on me, I stopped fighting, not that that did anything to douse the burning flame of my anger.

The Doctor took a few ragged breaths to steady himself.

"I'm sorry if that makes you think I don't trust you, but please believe me when I say I do. I'm sorry that what I said may have hurt you but Dahlia, you have to understand that this has been on my mind for a while now, since before we were even dancing around our feelings for one another," he breathed into my ear, rubbing soothing circles along my back. "And nothing has changed. My feelings for you, our relationship, us traveling along through time and space, my faith in you. Nothing. Has. Changed. Even if it had been some part of the original plan. It wouldn't have changed anything because I know you aren't faking your feelings. What we have is real, I know that. I hope you do."

Breathing in deeply, I felt The Doctor's scent soothe my anger, but the hurt was still there.
"I . . . I just can't understand why you would ever think that. I would never manipulate your feelings that way, even for the sake of the timeline. I never even thought you could feel this way for me. I mean, Rose and I are different people! I thought you went for her type, not me. I always thought I never had a chance."

"You said Rose and I never had a relationship. Why? Because whatever it is, we don't have that problem and never will," he said firmly.

I clasped at his jacket. "I don't know." I could hear the whine in my own voice but couldn't bring myself to care. "You two flirted a lot but never took it anywhere. I guess your current regeneration never saw her that way, but the next one definitely did. He was head over heels for her, and he never really got over her until Eleven, or that's what the show led us to believe. The relationship wanted to go somewhere, but it never did."

"Well I can assure you that our situation isn't like that. I'm not letting you go over some stupid
argument, Dahlia. You're stuck with me for a very long time," The Doctor finished.

Chuckling weakly, I buried my face in his shoulder, attempting to will away this entire situation from my memory.

The Doctor stroked my hair and hummed *The Girl from Ipanema* but slowed after the first chorus to ask, "What did you mean I didn't get over her until my Eleventh regeneration?"

I tensed up immediately. Shit. Of course I had made that sort of really stupid mistake. Of course I had to make some sort of accidental comment that would spoil whatever happiness I had attempted to give The Doctor.

Taking a deep breath in through my nose, I exhaled just as slowly and, going against everything I worked for up to this point to get him to trust me, lied. "Just something that happened on the show. Nothing I haven't already worked through, so you don't have to worry." I could tell he was worrying, even with my most assuring tone of voice. So, I looked into his eyes and smiled. "Just trust me. I have everything worked out. I might not be the best, but I know what I'm doing."

He kept my stare for several long moments; his eyes searching my face for any hint of a lie. It was a good thing I had gotten so good at hiding it.

Finally, he relented. With a deep sigh, The Doctor said, "I do trust you, Dahlia, I always will. But I'll still worry whenever you mention something like that. I couldn't stand losing you. You're the greatest thing to have happened to me in a long time. I don't know what I'd do if you suddenly left."

The confession had me forcing back tears. Guilt made my heart clench and stutter. "I'll never leave you, Theta." I don't know how I managed to choked out such a huge lie. It stung my throat and mouth like vomit and left an acidic coating over my tongue.

"So," The Doctor hummed, pulling away further so he could look at me better, "are we all right? No more talk of either of us not actually having feelings for the other? We're good?"

I nodded, giving him a shaky smile.

"Good." He kissed my nose and pecked my lips before releasing me. "I'm gonna go rework the circuitry of the console. If you need anything, anything, just come find me. We'll go take a stroll through the bioluminescent gardens. I mean, we'll do that later anyway, but if you wanna go sooner, just come and find me. How does that sound?"

"It sounds perfect."

He grinned happily at me. "Fantastic." Kissing me again, this time slower and deeper, he mumbled, "See you later, all right?"

"Mmhm."

The Doctor left after that. I shuffled over to the table, which was now back in its proper place, and pulled out a chair, practically falling into it. I buried my face in my hands. What had I just done? Why had I done it? Maybe The Doctor could help; he'd certainly know how to get around Canary Wharf. But what would be the consequences of warping one of the largest events in The Doctor's life? No. I couldn't take the chance. Even if the guilt ate away at me and eventually destroyed me. Even if The Doctor would never forgive me for lying to him. No matter how much it killed me to admit it, I had made a promise to Koschei about keeping this universe intact, and the survival of a dimension was more important than the happiness of the few.
At least that's what I told myself when I started to sob.
Surf's Up

The Doctor and I landed the TARDIS. He had wanted to do it on his own, whining, "I've flown this ship for nine hundred years. I think I can land in Cardiff without an accident!"

I had just rolled my eyes and took my place at the controls.

It didn't take long after we landed for a knock to echo on the door. Jack and The Doctor frowned and looked at me for an answer, but I didn't give them one. I just smiled innocently and motioned for Jack to answer the now constant knocking.

Jack opened the door and stuck his head out. "Who the hell are you?" There was a slight pause before he continued, "And who would you be, sweetheart?"

A very confused, very frustrated voice snapped back, "What d'you mean, who the hell am I? Who the hell are you? And don't hit on my girlfriend!"

"Captain Jack Harkness. Whatever you're selling, we're not buying."

"Get out of my way!" Mickey ordered, shoving past Jack and into the TARDIS, leading Ashley in by the hand.

Jack rolled his eyes and shut the door. "Don't tell me, this must be Mickey. Promise me that this is Ashley."

"Behave, Jack," I lightly admonished, opening my arms to receive Ashley's hug.

The Doctor looked down from his perch on a ladder, nearly blinding us with the ridiculous red light he had strapped to his head. A large book he claimed to be a manual for the TARDIS dangled from one of his hands. "Here comes trouble! How're you doing, Ashley? Ricky boy?"

Mickey scowled. "It's Mickey!"

Ashley stepped away from me and back to Mickey, putting a comforting hand on his arm. "Don't listen to him, he's winding you up."

Still pouting, Mickey relented and wrapped an arm around her waist.

Jack smiled. "Aww, sweet, look at these two. How come I never get any of that?" he asked The Doctor slyly, throwing a wink my way.

"Buy me a drink first."

"You're such hard work."

"But worth it," The Doctor replied, nodding at me. "Just ask Dahlia."

Jack looked at me expectantly.

I shrugged. "What he lacks in awareness he makes up for in other areas."

The ex-conman's eyebrows rose and he asked curiously, "'Other areas?' Do tell."

"Oi!" The Doctor warned, giving me a That Was Not Where I Wanted That Comment to Go look.
Rolling my eyes, I laughed. "It appears that I am being reprimanded. Seems like you'll just have to use your imagination, Jack." I turned my attention back to Ashley and Mickey. "So, how have you guys been? Staying out trouble? Being dull and domestic?"

Ashley rolled her eyes, replying, "If by that that you mean staying safe and not almost dying every time we step outside, then yes, we have been dull and domestic."

I wrinkled my nose in playful distaste. "That's just so boring. I don't see how you guys do it."

"I guess that means you're stayin' then?" Mickey piped up.

I smiled. "Was there ever any doubt?"

He laughed. "Guess not. So, what're you doing in Cardiff? And who the hell's Jumping Jack Flash? I mean, I don't mind you hanging out with big-ears up there—"

"Oi!" The Doctor interjected, glaring at Mickey.

Mickey didn't even twitch. "Look in a mirror." Nodding in Jack's direction, Mickey continued, "But this guy, I dunno, he's kinda . . ."

"Handsome?" Jack smiled confidently.

"More like cheesy," Mickey corrected.

Jack sent me a confused look. "Early 21st Century slang—is cheesy good or bad?"

"It's bad, and no, bad does not mean good," I answered.

Jack seemed ready to continue the discussion on confusing Earth lingo, but The Doctor interrupted him. "Are you saying I'm not handsome?" he said, attempting to cover his whine with a nasty look in Mickey's direction.

I rolled my eyes. Not even five minutes and they're ready to start fights. Taking The Doctor's hand, I laced my fingers with his and said, "Of course you are, Theta. You're just not Mickey's type, that's all."

He turned away from Mickey to immediately beam at me and peck my lips.

Jack giggled and whispered too loudly to Ashley, "Aren't they cute?"

Flipping Jack off, I looked back at Ashley, slightly fearing her reaction. Whether she thought it was too dangerous to be with The Doctor was irrelevant. She would want to talk about it and would need to know every single detail, down to what shade of blue the sky had been on the day I realized that I liked him more than just a friend.

I really did not want to deal with that, so I started rambling. "We just stopped to refuel. Cardiff has a rift running through the middle of the city. This rift is basically a door between our world and others—"

"The rift was healed back in 1869—" The Doctor interjected before I continued.

Rolling my eyes again, I finished, "Thanks to a girl named Gwyneth. She risked her life to save everyone then and now."

Despite the explanation, both Mickey and Ashley didn't seem to understand the discussion. At all.
"But closing a rift always leaves a scar, and that scar generates energy, harmless to the Human Race—" Excitement leaking through into a bright grin, Jack continued talking until The Doctor cut in.

"But perfect for the TARDIS, so just park it here for a couple of days right on top of the scar and —"

"Open up the engines, soak up the radiation—" Jack said.

I finished, "It's like filling her up with gas."

"Into time!" Jack whooped, high fiving me.

Joining in, The Doctor also high fived me, shouting, "Into space!"

"Fuck yeah!" I cheered, pumping both fists into the air.

Ashley looked like she wanted to say something but was too busy laughing to say it. Mickey decided to add his two cents, shaking his head at us but smiling at me. "My God, have you seen yourselves? You all think you're so clever, don't you?"

Standing tall, I proudly proclaimed, "If there's anything you learn from adventuring in the TARDIS, it's if you're clever or not, and Mickey, we certainly are clever." I clapped my hands together. "So, do you guys want a tour or not? I can't show you the entire TARDIS, but I can show you the rooms I've found so far."

Ashley's eyes lit up, and she rushed further into the TARDIS, dragging Mickey along with her and grabbing my hand along the way.

"Oi! Make sure they don't break anythin'!" The Doctor shouted out to me.

Ashley called back, "We aren't gonna break your precious ship, Mars Bars!"

"I'm not from Mars!" "He's not from Mars." The Doctor and I said at the same time.

"Whatever."

The tour went much better than I expected it to, though I thought it was because Ashley was too intent on getting information on my relationship with The Doctor to be freaked out by the distinctly other worldly parts of the ship. Mickey was more or less quiet, only speaking up to ask a question about a certain artifact that completely boggled him. The only thing that worried me was that I seemed to have knowledge of every one of them, even the ones The Doctor had never shown me before, and Koschei wasn't giving me answers.

Speaking of Koschei, he had a very distinctive dislike of both my human friends. Reluctantly, he agreed with The Doctor on calling Mickey an idiot while Ashley was stuck with Nosey Child. I got into a few light quarrels with him on the tour, earning me several worried looks from Ashley.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

I blinked slowly; coming out of a conversation with Koschei was slow and always left me feeling slightly empty afterwards.
"Yeah," I said slowly. "Fine. Just thinking about all this junk The Doctor has around." I prodded a large, upside-down container with my foot. A vaguely reptilian sound emitted from it, causing both Ashley and Mickey to jump away. "He really should clean up around the TARDIS."

What? It's not like I could actually tell her I had a voice inside my head. I hadn't even told The Doctor, and he would probably have a fit if I ever did; besides, it wasn't like Koschei was hurting me. He was doing the complete opposite by helping me around the TARDIS at times.

I rolled my shoulders. "Come on, let's head back. The Doctor and Jack are probably waiting for us there."

Once we made our way back to the console room, all of us stepped outside the TARDIS and into the clean air of Cardiff.

"Should take another twenty-four hours, which means we've got time to kill," The Doctor commented.

Mickey frowned. "That old lady's staring."

A smirk curled the corners of Jack's mouth. "Probably wondering what five people could do inside a small wooden box . . ." He said, suggestively patting The Doctor's shoulder.

Ashley snickered while Mickey snapped, "What are you captain of? The Innuendo Squad?"

Jack waved Mickey off and started walking away.

"Wait! Er, the TARDIS—we can't just leave it. Doesn't it get noticed?" Mickey asked worriedly.

"Yeah, what's with the police box? Why does it look like that?" Jack added.

"It's a cloaking device called a chameleon circuit," I started, looking to The Doctor for permission to continue. He grinned, wrapping an arm around my waist and pulling me closer. "The TARDIS is supposed to disguise itself to fit the time period, like if we were in Ancient Rome then it would be a statue or something like that. The Doctor first landed in 1960s England, but the circuit got stuck and it's been a police box ever since."

"So it copied a real thing?" Ashley asked. "There actually were police boxes?"

The Doctor nodded. "Yeah, on street corners. Phone for help before they had radios and mobiles. If they arrested someone, they could shove them inside until help came. Like a little prison cell."

"Why don't you just fix it then?" Jack asked curiously.

"Because it's supposed to be a police box! It's one of the very few constants of the TARDIS," I defended, trailing my fingers across the TARDIS doors. "Also, every time he fixes it, it just breaks again, so there's no point in the frustration."

Mickey furrowed his eyebrows. "But there's no police boxes anymore, so doesn't it get noticed?"

The Doctor untangled from me to place his hands on Mickey's shoulders. "Ricky, let me tell you something about the Human Race. You put a mysterious blue box slap bang in the middle of town and what do they do?" Mickey opened his mouth to answer, but The Doctor cut him off. "Walk past it. Now stop your nagging, let's go and explore!" He rewrapped his arm around me, and we started walking in a random direction.
Laughing, I didn't protest. "So what're we gonna do today?"

The Doctor shrugged. "I don't know! Cardiff. Early 21st Century. And the wind's coming from the . . . East. Trust me—safest place in the universe."

I rolled my eyes. "Uh-huh, sure, I'll totally believe that."

He gave me a cheeky grin. "Why wouldn't you?"

Our group ended up at some restaurant on Cardiff Bay. Everyone except me going for fish and chips. Being the fish hating person that I was, I plainly refused any of The Doctor's attempts to get me to eat it, zoning in on the large plate of nachos I had proudly ordered.

"I swear, six feet tall and with tusks—" Jack said animatedly.

"You're lying through your teeth!" The Doctor barked.

Ashley couldn't stop laughing. "I'd have gone mad!"

Jack continued on, "I mean, it turns out the white things are tusks and I mean tusks! And it's woken up, and it's not happy—"

"How could you not know it was there?" I asked.

"And we're standing there, fifteen of us, naked—"

"Naked?" Ashley sputtered.

The Doctor snorted. "Of course he was naked!"

"And I'm like, oh, no, no, it's got nothing to do with me! And then it roars, and we are running. Oh my God, we are running! And Brakovitch falls, so I turn to him and I say—"

"I knew we should've turned left!" Mickey finished, grinning.

"That's my line!" Jack objected, making us all burst into more peals of laughter.

Ashely giggled, "I don't believe you. I don't believe a word you say ever, that is so brilliant."

The Doctor wasn't paying attention to the story anymore. My laughter slowly died off when my gaze latched on to the newspaper that he was staring at. He stood up as Ashley asked, "Did you ever get your clothes back?"

"No, I just picked him up and went right for the ship, full throttle, didn't stop until I hit the spacelanes, I was shaking! It was unbelievable, I was freaking out and by the time I got there I was fifteen light-years away, I was like this!" Jack demonstrated something, but I wasn't paying any attention.

The Doctor wrenched the paper from the old man's hands and stared wide eyed at the front page. He slowly looked up at me and caught my gaze. Noticing the tension, the others quieted down.

"And I was having such a nice day," The Doctor sighed, holding up the paper. The headline New Mayor, New Cardiff sneered at us, a picture of the Slitheen in her Margaret skin suit right below it.
We stood in front of the town hall, a casual but dangerous ensemble.

"According to intelligence," Jack said. "The target is the last surviving member of the Slitheen family, a criminal sect from the planet Raxacoricofallapatorious, masquerading as a human being, zipped inside a skin suit. Okay, plan of attack, we assume a basic fifty seven/fifty six strategy, covering all available exits on the ground floor. Doctor and Dahlia, you go face-to-face, that'll designate Exit One. I'll cover Exit Two. Ashley, you're Exit Three. Mickey Smith, you take Exit Four. Have you got that?"

Pouting like a little boy, The Doctor snorted. "Excuse me. Who's in charge?"

Quickly giving a meaningful glance, Jack stood up a bit straighter. "Sorry. Awaiting orders, sir."

The Doctor nodded approvingly. "Right. Here's the plan." Then he relaxed and smiled. "Like he said. Nice plan. Anything else?"

"Yeah, just one thing," I interrupted. "Mickey and Jack need to switch positions."

"Why?" Mickey asked.

"Just trust me," I said.

"Anyone else got anything to add? No? Then present arms," Jack said. We all held out our cell phones. "Speed dial?"

"Set."

"Yup."

"Ready."

"Check."

Grinning lazily, Jack walked away from us. "See ya in hell."

The Doctor took my hand and we walked to the secretary's desk outside the mayor's door.

"Hello!" The Doctor grinned. "I've come to see the Lord Mayor."

Lifting his head up from his computer screen, the secretary blinked up at us uninterestedly. "Do you have an appointment?"

I smiled as innocently as possible. "No, sorry, we're just friends passing through and wanted to say hi. Maybe have a cup of tea, you know, that sort of thing."

"Well, she's just having a cup of tea," the secretary said.

The Doctor's grin got wider. "Just go in there, and tell her The Doctor would like to see her."

The secretary frowned. "Doctor who?"

"Just The Doctor," he replied. "Tell her exactly that. The Doctor."

"Hold on a tick . . ." the secretary said, getting up and entering the office.
Finally letting out a giggle that I had been holding in, I bit my lip to try and keep quiet.

The Doctor nudged me lightly. "What're you laughin' at?"

I looked up at him and smiled brightly. "He said the line."

He smiled happily back. "What line is that?"

"Doctor who," I whispered, breaking out in soft snickers.

The Doctor rolled his eyes affectionately, leaning over to press a kiss to my temple and nuzzle my hair. I was enjoying the care, but it was sadly interrupted by the sound of a teacup smashing coming from the office.

The secretary exited the office, barely opening the door and immediately closing it right after. He gave us a flustered look. "The Lord Mayor says thank you for-for popping by . . . she'd love to have a chat, but, um . . . she's up to her eyes in paperwork. Perhaps if you could make an appointment for next week . . ?"

I was already darting forward to the office doors when The Doctor asked, "She's climbing out of the window, isn't she?"

Pulling open the doors, all three of us were greeted to the sight of Margaret attempting to scoot out the window. The secretary let out a strangled noise. "Yes, she is."

Margaret disappeared out the window.

I pulled out my phone and connected to the other three. "Slitheen headed north."

"On my way," Ashley panted.

"Over and out," Jack said.

"Oh my God," Mickey gasped.

The secretary suddenly charged forward, barking at us, "Leave the mayor alone!"

I rolled my eyes and leaped out the window after Margaret. The Doctor followed right after. I didn't call out for Margaret to stop; she wouldn't listen. Instead, I conserved my energy and evened my breathing as Koschei murmured instructions on how to better my running technique.

Margaret turned down one pathway, but Ashley blocked her. She turned again, to what was originally the fourth exit, but Jack was there. Running back down the way she came and pulling off an earring at the same time, she skidded to a halt when she spotted me and The Doctor.

The Doctor called out to her mockingly. Margaret ignored him and bolted down the only open exit, pulling off her second earring.

The Doctor called out to her mockingly. Margaret ignored him and bolted down the only open exit, pulling off her second earring.

Ashley, Jack, The Doctor, and I all blocked her off at the opposite end. Before anyone else could say anything, I snarled, "God-fucking-dammit, Mickey! I switched you and Jack around so that this shit wouldn't happen!"

"Here I am!" Mickey gasped out when he finally appeared.

I whirled around to glare at him, opening my mouth to tear him apart verbally limb from limb, but Ashley stopped me.
"Calm down, Dahlia. It's not that bad. She's not exactly gonna outrun us, is she?"

"Yeeaaaah," I drawled dully. "I probably should've mentioned that."

Margaret teleported away in a flash of blue light.

"She doesn't have to," I finished.

We all stopped running; Ashley and Mickey stumbling slightly while Jack, The Doctor, and I immediately halted.

"She's got a teleport! That's cheating! Now we're never gonna get her!" Jack shouted angrily.

The Doctor gave me an ecstatic look. "Do you want the honors, or should I?"

"By all means, go ahead."

With the expression of a bubbly child, The Doctor pulled out his sonic screwdriver and held it in the air, clicking its button once. Right afterwards, Margaret reappeared and this time she was running towards us. The smile she wore immediately faded when she spotted us. As fast as she could, Margaret turned around and ran away, activating her teleport again. The Doctor pressed the same button on his sonic again, causing Margaret to once again appear. Again, Margaret turned around and used her teleport to vanish.

This time I couldn't help myself. I dug my own sonic out of my pocket and looked up at The Doctor. "Please?" I asked innocently, gently holding the screwdriver for him to see.

If possible, his smile widened even more. "Of course." He let his harm rest by his side and waited for me to activate my sonic.

Every bit as gleeful as The Doctor was, I raised my sonic up in front of me and clicked the button just as he had. Margaret reappeared again, this time angrier than the last. Once again, she used her teleport. I clicked the sonic. She reappeared.

That cycle went on several more times until she reappeared barely a foot from us, panting and gasping for breath.

I raised my eyebrows and smirked. "I could do this all day."

She glared at me. "This is persecution. Why can't you leave me alone? What did I ever do to you?"

The Doctor snorted, "You tried to kill us and destroy this entire planet."

Margaret rolled her eyes. "Apart from that."

We all unhappily followed Margaret back inside at her request. The Doctor didn't want to, but I was quick to remind him that if we stayed outside, it was highly possible that Margaret would reveal herself to the innocent human bystanders and that would just cause a huge, messy panic.

He agreed to the suggestion with an irritated, "Primitive apes."

That comment earned him a smack on the back of the head.
At the moment, we were with Margaret in the exhibition room. The model of her nuclear power plant was at its center with the project's name on a banner hung high on the back wall.

The Doctor spoke first, "So, you're a Slitheen. You're on Earth. You're trapped. Your family get killed, but you teleport out, just in the nick of time. You have no means of escape. What do you do? You build a nuclear power station." He gestured to the scale model that Ashley and Jack were examining curiously. "But what for?"

"A philanthropic gesture. I've learnt the error of my ways," she responded airily.

I rolled my eyes but kept my mouth shut, continuing to stare up at the banner as I slowly walked my way through the steps of my future.

The Doctor, of course, wasn't taking any of Margaret's shit. "And it just so happens to be right on top of the rift."

Faking ignorance, Margaret said, "What rift would that be?"

Jack stepped in to explain. "A rift in space and time. If this power station went into meltdown, the entire planet would go schwwwupboom!" A hand gesture was added for effect with the explosion noise.

The Doctor took a glance at scale model. "This station is designed to explode the minute it reaches capacity."

Ashley immediately straightened up to stare at him, furrowing her eyebrows and frowning deeply. "Didn't anyone notice? Isn't there someone in London checking this sort of stuff?"

Margaret rolled her eyes so hard I thought they would pop out of her skull and scoffed, "We're in Cardiff. London doesn't care! The South Wales coast could fall into the sea, and they wouldn't notice—oh . . . I sound like a Welshman. God help me, I've gone native."

"But why would she do that?" Mickey gawked. "A great big explosion—she'd only end up killing herself."

Not glancing away from the banner, I gave my own version of Margaret's line. "Mickey, when addressing the current Villain of the Week, please use their name. There's no reason to be rude while you foil their evil schemes."

"She's not even a she, she's a . . . thing," he spat.

"She's an alien, and so is The Doctor. They're people, not things, Mickey," I told him sternly, finally giving him my attention. "If you're going to hang around me and The Doctor, you should learn that."

I felt something prod at the edge of my consciousness. It was warmth and affection, approving and familiar in all the right ways. For a split second I was back on the TARDIS, in the middle of the sleep cycle and in bed with Theta, curled up against him and basking in his warmth while he told me another story about Gallifrey. Then I was back in the exhibition room, watching with wide eyes as The Doctor pried a section of the model off and flipped it over, revealing a circuit board underneath.

"Fantastic," he mumbled to himself.

Jack rushed over, the excitement in his voice obvious as he asked, "Is that a tribophysical
waveform macro-kinetic extrapolator?"

The Doctor didn't even bat an eye. "Couldn't have put it better myself."

Jack gently took the extrapolator from The Doctor, looking at it reverently. "Oooh, genius!" The Doctor's attention was drawn to the banner that I had been eyeing.

"You didn't build this," Jack commented to Margaret.

She shrugged. "I have my hobbies. A little tinkering . . ."

Jack interrupted her, "No, no, no, I mean, you really didn't build this. Way beyond you."

"I bet she stole it," Mickey barked.

"It fell into my hands," Margaret said coolly.

Ashley peered over at the machinery. "Is it a weapon?"

Jack shook his head and placed the extrapolator on the floor. "It's transport. You see—the reactor blows, the rift opens, phenomenal cosmic disaster, but this thing shrouds you in a forcefield, you have this energy bubble, zzhum, so you're safe. Then you feed it coordinates, stand on top, and ride the concussion all the way out of the solar system."

Margaret smiled innocently. "It's a surfboard."

Jack nodded slowly. "A pan-dimensional surfboard, yeah."

Her smile twisted into a sneer. Her tone was bitter as she spoke, "And it would've worked. I would've surfed away from this dead-end dump and back to civilization."

Mickey actually seemed surprised. "You'd blow up a whole planet just to get a lift?"

A cruel smirk spread on Margaret's mouth. "Like stepping on an anthill."

"How'd you think of the name?" The Doctor questioned, staring curiously up at the banner.

"What, Blaidd Drwg?" Margaret shrugged off the question. "It's Welsh."

"I know, but how did you think of it?"

"Chose it at random, that's all, I dunno. Just sounded good. Does it matter?"

The Doctor frowned. "Blaidd Drwg."

I could feel his eyes on me as he spoke the name, but I stubbornly refused to acknowledge anything was out of the ordinary. *Everything's fine. Those two words are meaningless. They have absolutely nothing to do with your inevitable regeneration.*

"What does it mean?" Ashley asked.

"Bad Wolf," The Doctor translated. He was staring at me so intensely that I thought he was going to burn holes me. " Everywhere we go. Two words. Following us. Bad Wolf." He tilted his head to try and catch my gaze, but I stubbornly refused to move. "Dahlia?"

"Honestly, Doctor," I huffed. "Everything's fine. There's nothing you need to worry about."
He frowned. "You sure?"

I nodded. "Yep, as long as everything goes as it should, maybe a little better, everything should be fine. You know how these things are." Should I feel bad about how good I had gotten at lying?

The Doctor searched my face for several moments before slowly nodding. "All right. Good. Fantastic." He turned back to Margaret. "We're takin' you home."

Jack frowned. "Hold on, isn't that the easy option, like letting her go?"

Margaret was quick to shoot down that thought. "They have the death penalty. The family Slitheen was tried in its absence many years ago and found guilty. With no chance of appeal. According to the statutes of government, the moment I return, I am to be executed. What do you make of that, Doctor?" She held The Doctor's stare, attempting to make him crack under guilt. "Take me home and you take me to my death."

He simply answered, "Not my problem."

Margaret was amazed by the TARDIS. "This ship is impossible! It's superb. How do you get the outside around the inside?"

The Doctor threw her an annoyed look. "Like I'd give you the secret, yeah."

Margaret continued, "I almost feel better about being defeated. We never stood a chance. This is the technology of the Gods."

"Don't worship me—I'd make a very bad God. You wouldn't get a day off, for starters," The Doctor scoffed before turning to Jack. "Jack, how we doin', big fella?"

Jack was kneeling at the console, dutifully wiring the extrapolator to it. I wanted to say something, warn him somehow, but that would screw up the future and it pissed me off.

"This extrapolator's top of the range," Jack commented, looking up at Margaret with suspicion. "Where did you get it?"

Again, Margaret shrugged off his distrust. "Oh, I don't know . . . some airlock sale . . ?"

"Must've been a great big heist. It's stacked with power."

The Doctor peered over his shoulder. "But we can use it for fuel?"

Pursing his lips, Jack shook his head. "It's not compatible, but it should knock off about twelve hours. We'll be ready to go by morning."

"Then we're stuck here," The Doctor sulked. "Overnight."

"I'm in no hurry . . ." Margaret chimed in.

Even though I was expecting something like it, I was still surprised when Ashley's excited voice piped up from beside Mickey. "We've got a prisoner! The police box is really . . . a police box!"

"You're not just police, though. Since you're taking me to my death that makes you my executioners. Each and every one of you . . ." Margaret said nastily, smiling coldly at each of us.
Mickey bluntly told her, "Well, you deserve it."

"You're very quick to say so. You're very quick to soak your hands in my blood. Which makes you better than me, how, exactly?" Mickey swallowed thickly at Margaret's words. Margaret continued to talk, making her way around the console. "Long night ahead . . ." The Doctor held her stare as she elegantly sat down in the pilot's chair. "Let's see who can look me in the eye." She looked around at each of our group; no one could hold her eyes for more than a few seconds. And then she stopped at me.

I wasn't overcome with guilt. I knew I wouldn't be. There was no reason for me to be upset since she wasn't really going to die. And even if she was, what should it matter to me? So I held her stare, echoing the same challenge she threw in our faces.

A spark a glee came to life in Margaret's eye. "Oooo, look, Doctor! It seems like you've had a bit more influence on this one than the others. Have you been training her? Teaching her to be a good little monster just like yourself? I'm impressed."

The Doctor tensed up. His hand clenched around the railing that he was casually leaning against. I saw a flash of the Oncoming Storm in his eyes at Margaret's words, and I knew that if I didn't intervene, he might end up killing her himself.

"The Doctor's influence on me is both small and none of your business. My ability to meet your eyes is from my own conviction, not his. From my perspective, you're getting off too easy," I said indifferently.

She only smiled. "It's nice to know that not all of humanity is full of spineless insects."

"Are you sure you don't want to come? It wouldn't be any trouble, really," Ashley insisted after attempting to get me to tag along with her and Mickey on their outing.

I shook my head, refusing her offer for the fourth time. "I'm fine, Ashley, go have a good time. I promise I won't leave without saying goodbye."

Pouting just a little, Ashley finally accepted my answer and, after giving a final hug, laced her fingers with Mickey's, and they were off on their date. The Doctor kept his eyes on the monitor, watching them as they left.

"So, what's on?" Jack asked.

The Doctor quickly switched the screen off. "Nothing."

Margaret had moved from her spot on the pilot's seat to leaning against the grill, her back to the TARDIS console. "I gather it's not always like this . . . having to wait," she said quietly, pausing briefly to think on what kind of reaction her next words might get. "I bet you're always the first to leave, Doctor. Never mind the consequences, off you go. You butchered my family and then ran for the stars, am I right? But not this time. At last, you have consequences . . . how does it feel?"

"I didn't butcher them," he snapped at her.

Jack scowled. "Don't answer back. It's what she wants."

The Doctor turned to him, forcefully saying, "I didn't" before responding to Margaret. "What about
"It only carries one," she snapped in defense. "I had to fly without coordinates. I ended up on a skip in the Isle of Dogs." No matter how many times I heard that line, I could never understand what was so funny about it. Maybe The Doctor and Jack would explain it to me once they were done laughing. "It wasn't funny!" Margaret growled.

"Sorry." The Doctor chuckled. "It is a bit funny, though." I'll admit I was a little weirded out when Margaret started laughing along with them.

"Do I get a last request?" Margaret asked when their laughter died down.

The Doctor paused. "Depends what it is."

"I grew quite fond of my little human life," Margaret sighed. "All those rituals . . . the brushing of the teeth, and the complicated way they cook things. There's a little restaurant. Just round the bay. It became quite a favorite of mine."

He walked over to look at her from over the railing. "Is that what you want? A last meal?"

"Don't I have rights?"

"Oh, like she's not gonna try to escape," Jack interrupted.

Margaret's expression tightened. "Except I can never escape the Doctor, so where's the danger? But I wonder if you could do it? To sit with a creature you're about to kill and take supper. How strong is your stomach?"

The Doctor's eyes slid over to me, looking for reassurance that nothing bad would happen if he filled her request. "Strong enough."

"I wonder. I've seen you fight your enemies . . . now dine with them."

"You won't change my mind," The Doctor scoffed.

Smirking, Margaret replied, "Prove it."

"Just do it, Doctor. Even if she tries to get away, Jack has something for that," I suggested.

"Yup, see?" Jack held up two metal bracelets. "You both wear one. If she moves more than ten feet away . . . Bzzzt! She gets zapped by ten thousand volts."

The Doctor gave me a short, questioning glance. I nodded my consent, and he turned back to Margaret with a certain smugness. "Margaret, would you like to come out to dinner? My treat?"

Margaret gave us another sickly sweet smile. "Dinner in bondage . . . works for me."

The Doctor slid over to my side as Jack attached one of the bangles to The Doctor's wrist and then Margaret's.

"You sure you're okay with this?" he muttered in my ear, tilting my chin up so I had to look him in the eyes.

Raising an eyebrow, I said, "Of course. Why wouldn't I be?"

He frowned. "It's just that lots of women don't like it when their blokes go out to dinner with other
women. Don't want you to get the wrong idea."

I attempted to suppress my laughter, but a bit of evil snickering managed to slip past. "Really
Doctor? I already know how this ends and besides, I'm not really one for jealousy. So unless you're
just flaunting the fact that you could get any pretty face you want, I'll be right here waiting."

The tense expression The Doctor had been wearing immediately broke out into a huge grin, and
then he kissed me, not a heavy, frantic kiss like what normally happened when he got worked up. It
was a soft kiss, nice and slow and showing me how much he appreciated my words even if he
couldn't say it out loud. When he pulled away, I was tempted to pull him back down and just
continue to kiss like that for however long we pleased.

But the nagging fact that not only was our sworn enemy Margaret in the same room as us, but Jack
was there, too, and I knew I would never hear the end of it from him if we continued on longer
than we already were. So I let The Doctor pull away and walk out of the TARDIS to go have
dinner with Margaret.

The TARDIS doors clicked shut and I looked towards Jack. He wasn't even trying to suppress his
smirk.

"What, Jack?" I asked, narrowing my eyes and daring him to say something about the show of
affection he had just witnessed.

He immediately threw up his hands in defense. "Nothing! I didn't say anything." He quickly
retreated under the console to continue linking the extrapolator to the TARDIS.

I waited, but several seconds' worth of silence soothed my suspicion and I slid into the pilot's chair.

Always be cautious around Jack Harkness.

"You two are just so cute," Jack voiced from his predisposed position.

"Jack . . ." I warned.

He laughed. "I know, I know. You two are both fearsome time travelers who shouldn't be trifled
with but still, I can't help but notice." He paused and the sound of machinery clinking echoed in the
console room. "It's not a bad thing, ya know. That he's willing to show how much he cares about
you in front of other people. In all honesty, I think it's really—"

The TARDIS suddenly began shaking violently, cutting off Jack before he could finish.

"What the hell?!" I shouted reflexively, pulling myself into a standing position from where I had
been thrown onto the floor.

Jack was already acting, tearing the extrapolator away from the console as fast as he could.
Avoiding the sparks that were flying off the console, I rushed to help him.

The Doctor burst in seconds later with Margaret trailing right behind. "What the hell are you
doing?" he barked at Jack.

"It just went crazy," Jack sputtered.

The TARDIS' infuriated and panicked screaming burned brightly in every crevice of my mind. She
knew exactly what was happening, and she was not happy. As The Doctor rushed over to the
console to do damage control, I attempted to mentally comfort her, using my sonic to run an
Explosions popped and banged on nearly every inch of the console; Jack and The Doctor worked frantically, simultaneously trying to stop the explosions and not get caught in one either.

"It's the extrapolator!" Jack shouted. "Dahlia and I disconnected it, but it's still feeding off the engine! It's *using* the TARDIS—I can't stop it!"

"Never mind Cardiff—it's gonna rip open the planet!" The Doctor spat.

Ashley chose that moment to burst through the doors, face drawn tight with both fear and worry. "What is it? What's happening?"

"Oh, just little *me*!" Margaret sneered.

I felt her presence behind me, and even though I knew it was going to happen, I reacted too slowly. The claws of Margaret's real body latched themselves around my throat and drug me away from the console. In a panic, I dropped my screwdriver to jerk and tear at her claws, but it did no good.

"One wrong move and she snaps like a promise!" Margaret warned The Doctor when he instinctually lunged to drag me back to safety.

His eyes darkened and he growled dangerously. "You harm her, and I'll destroy you, Margaret."

I could hear the way she was rolling her eyes in the tone of her voice. "I've had you bleating all night, poor baby, now shut it." She shifted us toward Jack. "You—fly boy—put the extrapolator at my feet."

Jack paused for a split second. Before Margaret could cut my air off, I managed to get out, "It's all right, Jack."

Considering my words, he looked to The Doctor for help.

The Doctor nodded his consent and Jack placed the extrapolator on the floor near Margaret's feet.

"Thank you. Just as I planned," she said, smiling.

"I thought you had to blow up a nuclear power station," Ashley snarled, slowly advancing from her placed at the doors.

It was surprising to see her so angry instead of frightened, but no less impressive.

"Failing that—if I were to be . . . arrested . . . then anyone capable of tracking me down would have considerable technology of their own. Therefore, they would be captivated by the extrapolator. Especially a magpie mind like yours, Doctor. So the extrapolator was programmed to go to Plan B!" Margaret answered cheerfully, tightening her grip on my throat and making me wheeze for breath. "To lock onto the nearest alien power source and open the rift." She looked around the TARDIS' interior, awe expressed in every inch of her body language. "And what a power source it found . . . I'm back on schedule . . . thanks to you."

Jack scowled. "The rift's gonna convulse—she'll destroy the whole planet."

"And you with it," She said carelessly.

Margaret, with her claws still firmly around my neck, shoved me to the side so she could stand on the extrapolator. "While I ride this board over the crest of the inferno all the way to freedom. Stand
back boys . . . surf's up."

I grasped the claws around my neck more firmly than before. Now was the time to struggle. Margaret was about to become occupied and the sooner I got out of her grip the sooner I could get back to The Doctor.

The TARDIS console creaked; one of its panels tore open, exposing the glowing, golden insides. Margaret immediately fixated on it. I kept my eyes on Theta's. His gaze never left mine.

"Of course, opening the rift means you'll pull this ship apart," he noted.

Margaret rolled her eyes. "So sue me."

The Doctor continued anyway, "It's not just any old power source. It's the TARDIS. My TARDIS. The best ship in the universe."

"It'll make wonderful scrap," Margaret barked back.

"What's that light?" Ashley asked, anger draining from her voice to be replaced by amazement.

Finally, I managed to break away from Margaret's grip. Stumbling toward The Doctor, I clutched at my throat and gasped out, "The heart of the TARDIS. This ship's alive. You've opened its soul."

Margaret didn't even notice; her breathing merely deepened and her head tilted to the side as she spoke dreamily. "It's . . . so bright . . ."

The Doctor was at my side now. I hadn't even seen him move. He wrapped an arm around my body and clutched me close to him, glaring over at Margaret and said coldly, "Look at it, Margaret . . ."

"Beautiful . . ." she murmured.

"Look inside, Blon Fel Fotch," he urged. "Look at the light."

In a strange twist of fate, Margaret turned away from the light that completely lit up her face. She looked The Doctor in the eye and said, "Thank you." Then the light of the TARDIS engulfed her. Her body seemed to disappear and only the skin suit remained in a pile on the grating floor.

The Doctor's hand slammed over my eyes, blocking out any view that I had of the console room. "Dahlia, keep your eyes closed even after I move away," he hissed in my ear before darting forward to the console. "Don't look—stay there—close your eyes," he ordered Jack and Ashley as he snapped different levers down to close up the gap in the panels. The gap closed and the white light disappeared. "Now, Jack, come on—shut it all down. Dahlia, Ashley, get that panel over there—turn all the switches to the right." Ashley surprised me at how fast she moved to assist me at the console.

"Ashley, get that switch up there and up that lever—no, the other one. Yeah, that one. Good, now let me get this side," I directed, twisting a set of knobs eighty-three degrees to the left.

The Doctor caught my eye over the console, and I could see the proud gleam in his eyes. He flashed me a smile when the TARDIS finally went back to normal. "Nicely done. Thank you, all."

Looking slightly terrified, Ashley turned to The Doctor. "What happened to Margaret?"

Jack shrugged. "Must've got burnt up. Carried out her own death sentence."

I shook my head. "No, she's not dead." I shuffled over to the body suit, nudging at it with my foot
because, *ew*, that thing was just nasty.

"Then where'd she go?" Ashley asked me.

The Doctor answered, moving to my side to stare down at the skin suit, as well. "She looked into the heart of the TARDIS, and even I don't know how strong that is. And the ship's telepathic. Gets inside your head. Translates alien languages. Maybe the raw energy can translate all sorts of thoughts . . ." He kneeled down next to it and rummaged around through its folds. Ashley, Jack, and I huddled around him, Ashley keeping slightly closer to me and wrinkling her nose in disgust.

"Here she is!" The Doctor cried out victoriously, pulling a large, black egg from the skin suit.

"An egg?" Ashley asked, puzzlement written all over her face.

"Regressed to her childhood," he said proudly.

"She's an egg?" Jack parroted Ashley.

The Doctor smiled brightly. "She can start again! Live her life from scratch. If we take her home, give her to a different family, tell 'em to bring her up properly, she might be all right!"

"Or she might be worse," Jack said countered.

"Then that's her choice," I said scratchily, clearing my throat. The Doctor looked like he was about to sweep me into the med-bay, but I waved him off. "I'll be fine."

"But she's an egg," Ashley mumbled.

"Yes," I confirmed. "The species of Raxacoricofallapatorius hatch from eggs."

Ashley blinked owlishly. "Oh, my god! Mickey! I just left him!"

Smiling, I held my arms out for a hug. "I'll make sure to call more, all right? I know you, Mickey, and Jackie worry when I don't."

She squeezed me tightly. "You better remember, or I'll spam you with so many texts your phone will explode."

I laughed and returned the squeeze and then released her. "Go find your boyfriend before he has a panic attack. And tell him bye for me."

"I will," she said before dashing out the doors.

"Dahlia," The Doctor muttered.

"Hm?" I hummed, turning back to him.

He gently took my jaw in his hands and moved it from side to side so he could examine my neck. "Come on, I'm taking care of this right now before you make me forget," he said firmly, softly stroking my neck where it was sore from Margaret's claws. He took my hand and started leading me through the TARDIS, handing the egg off to Jack for safekeeping.

I huffed, "I told you I'll be fine. I've had worse. Remember our first adventure? End of the world?"

He frowned. "Don't remind me of that. You shouldn't be getting hurt at all."
We approached the infirmary and the door automatically opened. I rolled my eyes. "Our lives are dangerous, Doctor. Getting hurt is part of the adventure."

The Doctor instructed me to sit on a table. I did so, rolling my eyes again while he rummaged through a cold storage unit near the back of the room. I kicked my legs out like a little kid, throwing my head back, and humming extra loud to show my impatience.

"Remember the last time we were in here?" I thought out loud suddenly.

"Yes," The Doctor said, not pausing in his rummaging. "How could I forget? The palms of your hands had been melted off."

I rolled my eyes again.

"Don't roll your eyes. It's rude."

"You're rude," I scoffed. "And I meant about what happened after my hands were healed."

He seemed to find what he was looking for because he turned around with vial filled with a clear, light blue liquid in his hands. A small smile crossed his face. "Ah, yes, that."

"It's a very good memory, don't you think?" I asked slyly, smirking up at him when he finally reached the table I was sitting on.

He smirked back. "Oh, yes, very good memory." He kissed me, cupping my face to hold me steady so he could ravage my mouth with his tongue and scrape his teeth along my bottom lip.

After several breathless seconds, he pulled away and dangled the vial in front of my flushed face. "Now, drink this so I don't have to worry about your wonderful vocal chords getting damaged because you're stubborn."

I stuck my tongue out playfully but took the vial out anyway, unscrewing the cap and downing the contents. Mint swept through my mouth and down my throat, immediately soothing the slight throbbing burn that had taken place there.

"Time Lord medicine is so much better than human medicine," I sighed appreciatively.

The Doctor took the vial and disposed of it in one of the TARDIS' many recycling shoots. "Now," he said, offering me his hand, which I immediately took, "Let's take Margaret home."

When we returned to the console room, Jack was cleaning up and doing a systems check. He moved to the side when The Doctor and I sidled up beside him; The Doctor flicked a switch and grinned. "We're all powered up. We can leave. Opening the rift filled us up with energy—we can go."

"Perfect," I said, pulling a lever.

Jack beamed. "Next stop, Raxacoricofallapatorius. Now, you don't often get to say that."

"We'll just stop by and pop her in the hatchery," The Doctor explained enthusiastically. "Margaret the Slitheen can live her life again! A second chance!"

I smiled and shook my head. The Doctor took the set of controls on the opposite side of the console and nodded for me to start. Giggling to myself, I slid my fingers along a row of buttons and flicked two short levers in opposite directions, basking in the bliss of the TARDIS' engines as they roared.
to life.
"Fuck," I hissed, groaning in pain when I shifted from my spot face down on the floor. My head was pounding; something in the back on my mind was telling me it was from sudden, unprepared teleportation. I finally managed to shove myself up into a sitting position to have an unneeded look around the room. My memory of my last few moments on the TARDIS were slightly blurred. The last thing I clearly remembered was The Doctor, Jack, and I returning from Japan . . . in the feudal era . . . shit.

"Shit, shit, shit-shit-shit-shit shit," I snarled under my breath, fisting my hands in my hair and tugging it hard enough to rip several dozen strands out. I bent forward to rest my forehead on my knees, continuing my muttered curses.

I wasn't ready for this. I hadn't prepared . . . mentally, physically . . . especially not emotionally. Did I really have the guts to look into the heart of the TARDIS? What if something went wrong? And how was I supposed to deal with losing my Doctor? My first Doctor? The one I fell for and had traveled with for over a year?

Oh God. What if something about our relationship changed when he regenerated? What if he didn't have the same feelings anymore? Isn't that how it went? New New Doctor, new new thoughts and feelings. Right?

This was definitely a bad time for all of this to come crashing down on me. I still had to survive the game, and I had absolutely no clue how I was supposed to do that. I mean, it wasn’t like these things hadn't occurred to me before now. The closer and closer we got to the end of Nine, my doubts kept getting worse, but I just kept denying it. I didn't want to think about losing what I had, and now that I was here I didn't have a plan and . . .

"Excuse me, miss?"

I looked up, fingers still twisted in my hair, into the face of an older gentleman.

He gave me a sympathetic look. "It's all right . . . it's the transmat. Does your head in."

I just stared at him.

"So, uh . . ." he muttered awkwardly, "what's your name?"

"Dahlia," I said darkly. "Now, if you don't mind, I need to leave. I'm not supposed to be here, and I have to find my friends."

He shook his head. "Just remember. Do what the Android says. Don't provoke it. The Android's word is law."

Scowling, I shot back, "No, it is not! I'm not playing this stupid game. I will not be held hostage for someone else's entertainment. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm leaving to go find my friends."

Climbing up off the floor, I started toward the door, but halfway there, a female voice stopped me.

"Positions, everyone! Thank you!"

The man grabbed my arm and tugged me toward the woman. "Come on. Hurry up!"

"What? No!" I said, attempting to yank by arm away. I only succeeded in sending myself off
balance, teetering on just my heels before the man yanked me back into a non-falling position.

"Steady now . . ." he mumbled to me.

"That's enough chat!" the loud woman called out again. "Positions! Final call!"

When I finally managed to get a look at the woman, I saw that she was standing next to the deactivated vaporizing robot from the episode. The robot was up a raised platform in front of a half circle of six podiums; four of the podiums had people standing behind them already.

"Good luck!" the woman said, addressing all the contestants.

The man, you know, the one who still had a fucking death grip on my arm, beamed in anticipation, turning his stupid sunshine face towards me.

I took extreme glee in watching his expression falter in the face of my sour expression. "I'm not supposed to be here." He opened his mouth to speak, but I cut him off, "Yes, I know that there's a podium with my name on it. I'm telling you that I don't give a flying fuck."

Finally, he scowled. "And I'm telling you, I don't care. Now, come on!" He physically drug me up to the podiums, shoving me into place behind the one with my name on its front.

I reared around to cuss him out/kick his ass with a podium, but the woman shouted, "Android activated!"

Immediately, I froze in place and turned to the android, fear roiling in my gut as my heart sped up. The android sprang up, revealing that its face was shaped like a female. "Welcome to The Weakest Link!" it said.

I couldn't decide whether to scream or not.

The show's theme music played on.

It was commercial break, and I was freaking the fuck out. The podium was creaking under my grip and I swore I could see cracks in its surface. Koschei's watch was a throbbing like an ache at my thigh; he wasn't happy. Normally he didn't have any problem with these types of shows. Right now his rage seemed to be placed with the fact that I was the one in danger, and if I wasn't worried about dying at the moment, I would be touched by his sentiment.

"17 . . . 16 . . . 15 . . . thank you people," the woman, or floor manager, as I recalled, said.

"Transmitting in 12 . . . 11 . . . 10 . . ."

Koschei, what're we going to do? Should I just follow along the story? Rose survived because she had no knowledge of future pop culture, I frantically tried to reason with myself, but when you're in the middle of a life or death game of The Weakest Link and have no actual way of winning, your mind tends to freak out just a bit.

Just leave everything to me, love, he muttered to me. I can give you answers to the questions, but we'll have to keep the correct answers to a minimum since we actually need to survive long enough for your Doctor to get here.
Outside of my head, I started to argue about why I wasn't supposed to be here, but the man from earlier cut me off. "I swear to God, if you start screaming about how you're not supposed to be here, I will make it my mission to get you voted off."

My jaw snapped shut with a clack. Koschei’s raging increased, but it was now directed at the man, not just the game in general.

"3, and cue!" the floor manager shouted.

"Let's play The Weakest Link!" the android said. The sound effects played and the lights zoomed in on one guy. "Start the clock. Agorax—the name of which basic food stuff is an anagram of the word beard?"

"Bread," came a shaky voice to my right.

"Correct. Fitch—in the Pan Traffic Calendar, which month comes after Hoob?"

"Is it . . . Clavadoe?"

"No, Pandoff. Dahlia, in maths, what is 258 minus 158?"

"One hundred," I answered automatically, palms sweaty even with such an easy question.

"Correct. Rodrick—"

The man cut the android off, saying, "Bank."

"Which letter of the alphabet appears in the word 'dangle' but not in the word 'gland'?"

Staying silent for a moment, Rodrick finally answered with, "E."

"Correct. Colleen—in social security, what D is the name of the payment given to Martian Drones?"

"Default."

"Correct. Broff—the Great Cobalt Pyramid is built on the remains of which famous Old Earth Institute?"

Biting my lip to keep myself silent because that was one of the few answers that I actually knew, I threw Broff a worried glance, hoping to impossibly send him the correct answer telepathically.

Broff stumbled over his answer, "T-Touchdown . . . ?"

"No—Torchwood." Then the 'Anne' Droid started again, turning back to the first person. "Agorax—in language, all five examples of which type of letter appear in the word 'facetious'?"

"Vowels."

"Correct. Fitch—in biology, which blood cells contain iron—red or white?"

"Um . . . white?" he said uncertainly.

I winced at that. I mean, really?

"No, red. Dahlia—in the holovid series 'Jupiter Rising', the Grexnik is married to whom?"
"No, the correct answer is Lord Drayvole."

"What the fuck? That wasn't my fucking answer, you stupid pile of sheet metal!" I snarled in my head.

"Rodrick—in maths, what is nine squared?"

"So, Dahlia, what do you actually do?" the Anne Droid asked me conversationally, like we all weren't in a giant game of Be Right or Die.

Giving the camera my best sneer, I snarked, "I travel around through time and space in a blue box and kick ass with my hot alien boyfriend. You know, the usual stuff a young woman does at my age."

"Another way of saying 'unemployed'."

"No, it's a way of saying I'll turn you into scrap if you don't shut the fuck up."

The robot was silent for a moment before asking, "Why Rodrick?"

"Because he's a twat," I said sourly.

Rodrick glared at me, but my vote didn't matter anyway. Almost all the others had voted for Fitch. The Anne Droid slowly turned to her.

"Let me try again, it was the lights and everything—I couldn't think—" Fitch begged breathlessly.

But androids have no mercy. "With three answers wrong, Broff was the weakest link in that round, but—it's votes that count."

"I'm sorry. Oh, please . . . oh God, help me!" Fitch pleaded.

I held back the tears that burned my eyes, but I continued to watch. Rodrick looked away, and Broff sobbed as quietly as he could into the board he was holding up.

"Fitch—you are the weakest link. Goodbye!" The android then opened its mouth, firing the weapon that was inside. I watched as Fitch was disintegrated, leaving only smoke behind the podium where she had been standing.

"And we've gone to the adverts. Back in three minutes!" the floor manager shouted.

"This is barbaric," I seethed, gripping the sides of my podium tightly.

Rodrick snorted. "She was the weakest link—she gets disintegrated. Blasted into atoms."

I sneered at him. "She was the weakest link. . . do you hear yourself? This is an entire fucking game station where people who are voted off are murdered on live television! For other people's entertainment! As civilizations advance, they're supposed to grow out of these cruel entertainments, but oh no! Not with the human race! We just love to come full circle with everything!" I was shouting by now and had the attention of nearly everyone on the entire floor. I was about to go for another round when Broff suddenly seemed to burst.
"I'm not playing! I-I can't do this . . ." He whimpered as his tears finally overflowed and left wet trails down his cheeks. Survival instinct seemed to kick in as the Anne Droid turned to face him; Broff leaped from the stage and sprinted to the door. "I'm not—please, somebody let me—"

I was so stupid! Why hadn't I thought of it before?

I fumbled and grappled at my pockets, desperately searching them but only came up with Koschei's watch. Where is it? Where is it? It should be here! I had it in Feudal Japan for Christ's sake! No . . . oh no . . . . My sonic was in the TARDIS. I had been holding it when we had all been snatched up; most likely, I had dropped it when I was teleported.

"You are the weakest link." The Anne Droid took aim once more and fired, disintegrating Broff.

"Goodbye."

My hand dug deeply into my pocket to tightly clasp the pulsing watch for some semblance of comfort. Whatever Rodrick said, I ignored it. There really was no way out for me. No cheat codes or extra dialogue, I had to play along and pray my lines were right because if they weren't, I was dead and so was this universe.

One by one, the other contests were disintegrated. The only thing the Anne Droid said to them was, "You are the weakest link. Goodbye!" Rodrick and I were the only ones left. I think his dislike for me had leveled up to him wanting me to be disintegrated. That was all right though, not like I hadn't given him enough reason to. I had been voting for him for every round, always with the same phrase, "Because he's a twat."

"Going to break! Two minutes on the clock! Just a reminder—we've got solar flare activity up in ten!" the floor manager called out.

My gaze swept across the floor, glaring at each individual worker.

"What? Not going to ask me why I haven't been voting for you?" Rodrick asked conceitedly while wiping Colleen's name from his whiteboard. His slimy gaze left trails on my body as he watched me for a reaction.

I didn't look at him. "I already know why," I retorted indifferently. "You want to keep me here until the last round so that it'll be easy for you to win the prize money." I turned to him. "Why do you think I've been voting for you every time the opportunity arises?" Shrugging and looking away from him, I continued, "I have bigger things to worry about than your greed."

Unwinding my muscles from their tense positions, I tried not to think about Agorax's recent despairing scream as he was disintegrated. And then there were two . . . I thought bitterly, scrutinizing the Anne Droid.

"That leaves Dahlia and Rodrick—you're going head-to-head . . . let's play 'The Weakest Link'." Rodrick and I did not exchange any last parting phrases. Not like I wanted to talk to the sick bastard anyway.

This time the commercial break was skipped over completely; the Anne Droid went straight to
asking us both questions.

"Dahlia, in geography, the Grand Central Ravine is named after which Ancient Britain City?"

"York?" I had decided to not even try now. Koschei had been giving me correct answers the entire game (that I had decided to ignore), but now his voice was weak and I could tell just how much energy he was using to keep the connection up and continue to help me.

"No, the correct answer is Sheffield. Rodrick, in literature, the author of Lucky was Jackie who?"

"Stewart?"

"No, the correct answer is Collins. Dahlia, the oldest inhabitant of the Isop Galaxy is the Face of what?"

Not even trying to cover how smug I was, I smiled and answered, "The Face of Boe."

There was a moment of silence. Rodrick took it as a time to gape like a floundering fish.

"That is the correct answer. Rodrick, in history, who was the President of the Red Velvets?"

"Hoshbin Frane."

"That is the correct answer. Dahlia, in food, the dish Gaffabeque originated on which planet?"

"The planet of Who Gives a Fuck?"

"Nope, the correct answer is Lucifer. Rodrick, which measurement of length is said to have been defined by the Emperor Jate as the distance from his nose to his fingertip?"

"Would that be a goffle?"

"No. The correct answer is a paab. Dahlia, in fashion, Stella Pok Baint is famous for what?"

"Men's lingerie?"

"No. The correct answer is hats. Rodrick, in physics, who discovered the Fifteen-Dash-Ten Barric Fields?"

"San . . . Hazeldine."

"No, the correct answer is San Chen. Dahlia, in history, which Icelandic city hosted Murder Spree Twenty?"

I took a deep breath. This was it. The last question before I was 'disintegrated'. A part of me hoped The Doctor would be early. Another part wished I could tell him that I was going to be alright . . .

"Due to my religious beliefs, I request a pencil and paper to write down the answer to this question!" I barked, overcome with a rather ridiculous idea.

"On what grounds?" the Anne Droid demanded.

I furiously thought up a lie. "Speaking the names of Icelandic cities is a sin in my religion, and I'd rather not be damned for eternity just because of some stupid game show that I did not wish to be on voluntarily."
The Anne Droid paused to sort through its lines of code and check if I could have this one liberty.

"Request granted."

*Hell* fuckin' *yes!* I screamed internally. Some random helper rushed up to hand me the paper and pencil. The timer was ticking down closer and closer to zero so my writing was scrawled more so than usual, but I finished with three seconds to spare. Grinning up at the cameras, I cheerfully stated, "My answer is-I'm dead anyway, so fuck you'."

"No, the correct answer is Pola Ventura."

My pulse sped up, and my breathing got heavy. This was it. A ringing started in my ears, blocking out all other sound, even Rodrick's joyous shouts. The fact that I lost didn't faze me; I still had my grin in place. In fact, it was probably looking a bit manic by now. I clenched the paper in my hand, crumpling it.

"DAHLIA!"

The ringing stopped. "Doctor . . ." I whispered, grinning up at him. He stood in the doorway but ran towards me when he spotted me. "My Doctor . . ."

"Dahlia," the Anne Droid said, "you leave this life with nothing—"

"Stop this game!" Jack hollered.

The Doctor bellowed, "I order you to stop this game!"

The floor manager shoot her head. "We're live on air!"

"Doctor!" I finally managed to scream.

He dashing towards me, face full of desperation and fear. I could see the pleading in his eyes, even from where I stood at my podium. With the paper in hand, I ran towards him, too.

"You are the weakest link."

*Not yet, not before I give him this* . . . I knew I wouldn't make it if I tried to hand it to him, so I threw it. The ball of paper sailed through the air and, in a panic to catch it, The Doctor fumbled and nearly collapsed in the middle of the game floor.

"Read it!" I shrieked, tears stinging my eyes as I dissolved into sobs. "And don't you dare give up, you stupid—"

I didn't get to finish. The disintegration beam made sure of that.

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The Dalek was the first thing I saw when I opened my eyes.

I scrambled backwards into a wall when it started towards me. Its plunger was inches away from me when it stopped. I waited for it to say something, anything, mostly likely 'Exterminate!', but still nothing.

Another Dalek appeared behind the first. A small group of the bastards was following him like he was a fucking mother duck.
"Alert! Alert! We are detected!" it screeched.

"It is The Doctor! He has located us!" the Dalek holding me in place replied. "Open communications channel!"

I slid my hand into my pocket and clutched at the watch; it pulsed warmly in my frozen, clammy hand.

The second Dalek swiveled its eyestalk to face me. "The female will stand!"

"Bitch, I'll sit if I fuckin' want to!" I snapped, glaring up at it like a bratty child.

"You will stand or be exterminated!" it retaliated.

Huffing, I stood, holding my chin high and scowling at any Dalek that dared to point its eyestalk at me. A screen-like projection materialized mid-air, showing The Doctor, Jack, two women, and a man.

"I will talk to The Doctor first!" the original Dalek screamed.

The Doctor snorted, "Oh, will you? That's nice. Hello!" He waved mockingly, the fake grin he had put in place slowly retreating from his face.

I could tell as soon as he dismissed the Daleks as an immediate threat, because as soon as he did, his eyes slid over to watch me instead of the Dalek. That made me smile.

"The Dalek stratagem nears completion. The fleet is almost ready. You will not intervene."

Rolling my eyes until they nearly popped out of my head, I muttered, "Oh please, The Doctor's basic life motto is I do what I want. Like you idiots could tell him what to do."

"Oh, really? Why's that then?" The Doctor questioned, unfortunately not hearing my radical comeback.

"Our have your associate. You will obey, or she will be exterminated."

The Doctor looked to me, and I could tell he was asking for permission to be the strong male hero that he knew I didn't need. And like the wonderful girlfriend that I was, I nodded my consent.

"No," The Doctor said simply. Jack, the two women, and the man all snapped up straight to gape at him.

Sounding more surprised than other Dalek I had heard before, the first one demanded, "Explain yourself!"

The Doctor shrugged. "I said 'no'."

"What is the meaning of this negative?!"

"No means no, buttercup," I teased, not being able to resist the temptation.

"But she will be destroyed!" the Dalek screeched, hitting a frequency I didn't know it could and nearly destroying my eardrums.

The Doctor slammed his hands down onto the control panel in front of him, leaning in close to the camera. "No! 'Cos this is what I'm gonna do—I'm gonna rescue her! Even though I know she
doesn't need rescuing."

I smiled crookedly at that. Oh yes, it was good to be queen.

The Doctor smirked back. "I'm gonna save Dahlia Tombew from the middle of the Dalek Fleet, and then I'm gonna save the Earth, and then just to finish off, I'm gonna wipe every last stinking Dalek outta the sky!"

The Dalek shouted its objections, "But you have no weapons! No defenses! No plan!"

The Doctor grinned. "Yeah. And doesn't that scare you to death?" He focused his attention solely on me again. I met his gaze, standing leisurely amongst a platoon of Daleks without a care in the world.

"Dahlia?"

"Yes, Theta?"

"I'm coming to get you." He paused for a slightly second. His hand was hovering over the button that I knew would disconnect the signal.

I beamed up at him. "You always do."

The Doctor smiled and disconnected.

The Daleks seemed to explode.

"The Doctor is initiating hostile action!" "The stratagem must advance! Begin the invasion of Earth!" "The Doctor will be exterminated!" Everything Dalek on the ship started spinning. Round and round they went, chanting "Exterminate", each time growing louder and louder until all I heard was static.

I just stood there amongst them, not moving a muscle. Why should I worry? My Doctor was coming for me.
New Mouth, That's Weird

A Dalek, the one that had cornered me against the wall, turned towards me. "You know The Doctor! You understand him! You will predict his actions!"

I pretended to think. "Um . . . how about no?"

The Dalek glided closer, violently moving its eyepiece from side to side. "Predict! Predict! Predict!" It screeched.

Before I could snap back at the thing, the second Dalek to appear spoke up, "TARDIS detected! In flight!"

"Launch missiles! Exterminate!"

My breath caught in my throat even though I knew The Doctor wouldn't be hit by the missiles.

The ship shook when the Daleks fired off the missiles. I stumbled away from the Dalek, only now remembering that the TARDIS was about to materialize around the two of us. Too late. The grinding gears of the TARDIS' engines filled the surrounding area and a breeze tugged at my hair and clothing. The Doctor's shape was just an outline at the TARDIS, but he was becoming clearer and clearer as the TARDIS materialized. When the TARDIS finally settled, I immediately dropped to the ground. The Dalek managed to get off one shrieked "Exterminate!" before its fired death ray was reflected back at it by Jack. I covered my head so as to not be hit with remnants of exploded Dalek.

I wasn't on the floor long after that before I was being jerked up by strong, frantic hands and pulled into a desperate embrace. Beaming gratefully, I returned the hug as tightly as I could, smothering myself in The Doctor's chest.

"Told you I'd come and get you," The Doctor muttered into my hair.

My smile didn't falter. "Never doubted you for a second, Theta."

"I did."

I rolled my eyes. "Oh yes, that definitely reassures me of your vigilance."

"Are you all right? They didn't hurt you, did they?" he questioned, backing up just enough to examine me for injuries.

"I'm fine, maybe a bit rattled from sassing a Dalek. What about you?"

He shrugged. "Not bad, been better." He stared over my shoulder at the obliterated Dalek.

"Go inspect it, Doctor. I owe Jack a hug anyway," I said, releasing him and waiting for him to release me.

The Doctor leaned down to kiss my cheekbone and then unwound his arms from around me, moving away to examine the corpse.

Jack immediately engulfed me in a hug, tugging me up and off the ground so that my feet dangled for a short while before he decided to place me safely back down. I smacked him immediately after.
"Ow!" he pouted, rubbing the area on his chest where I had hit him. "What was that for?"

"For making me worry about you."

"Oh, you were lucky," Jack said, motioning to the device he had used against the Dalek. "I was just a one-shot wonder. Drained the gun of all its power supply. Now it's just a piece of junk."

We both looked at the Doctor, who was still examining the Dalek. Slowly, we made our way to look for ourselves. The Dalek's armor had been blasted away by the death ray, revealing the octopus-looking creature inside.

Jack broke the quiet, "One minute they're the greatest threat in the universe, the next minute they vanished out of time and space."

The Doctor's eyes didn't falter from the Dalek as he said, "They went off to fight a bigger war... the Time War..."

"I thought that was just a legend," Jack gaped, his eyes widening.

"I was there," The Doctor spoke up bravely. "The war between the Daleks and the Time Lords. With the whole of creation at stake. My people were destroyed, but they took the Daleks with them." His voice softened and he added sadly, "I almost thought it was worth it. Now it turns out they died for nothing."

Jack frowned, "There's thousands of them, and we could hardly stop one. How are we going to deal with all the rest?"

The Doctor snorted and started down the ramp. "No good standing 'round here chin-wagging! Human race, you'd gossip all day. The Daleks have got the answers—let's go and meet the neighbors."

I rolled my eyes, muttering under my breath, "You're an idiot." But I followed him anyway with Jack trialing behind me.

As soon as The Doctor opened the door, we were greeted with the Daleks from before. All of them were still screaming "Exterminate! Exterminate! Exterminate!" and firing their lasers in every direction, but mostly at the TARDIS. Thankfully the TARDIS shields were powerful enough to deflect the Dalek weaponry. After several moments, the gunfire died down into silence.

Grinning mockingly, The Doctor raised his arms. "Is that it? Useless! Null points." He leaned against the doorframe of the TARDIS and turned to look at Jack, who was barely peeking his head out the door rather than mirroring me as I stood beside The Doctor. "It's all right, come on out. That force field can hold back anything."

I slapped my hand over Jack's mouth just as he started to speak, offering the Daleks a fake smile. "That's right. There's nothing that can break through the TARDIS defenses."

The Daleks watched us silently.

The Doctor stepped forward and rose his head high to speak to the aliens. "D'you know what they call me in the ancient legends of the Dalek home-world? The Oncoming Storm." He glared at the army. "You might've removed all your emotions... but I reckon that right down deep in your DNA, there's one little spark left. And that's fear." At The Doctor's words, the most forward-sitting Dalek's eyepiece started to shake. "Doesn't it just burn when you face me? So, tell me—how did you survive the Time War?"
A deep, ominous voice burst from nowhere. "They survived through me!"

The three of us nearly broke our necks as we snapped them to face the direction where the voice had come from. A humungous Dalek came into view.

Gaping, The Doctor took several awe-filled steps toward the creature. "Dahlia . . . Captain . . . this is the Emperor of the Daleks."

"You destroyed us, Doctor! The Dalek race died in your inferno, but my ship survived, falling through time, crippled but alive!" the Emperor shrieked.

"I get it." The Doctor's face twitched in annoyance.

One Dalek barked, "Do not interrupt!" It was then repeated by two other Daleks.

"That was rude," I murmured.

Jack elbowed me; I scowled at him. "Well, it is! First they kidnap me, attempt to murder you two, and then don't even offer us all tea when the TARDIS lands! That's called being rude." I blinked in astonishment at when I just said and then felt sick. "Oh God . . . I'm turning British."

The Doctor coughed loudly to cover up his laughter. "I think you're forgetting something. I'm the Doctor. And if there's one thing I can do—it's talk. I've got five billion languages, and you haven't got one way of stopping me. So if anybody's gonna shut up, it's you!" His snapping tone on the last word caused several of the closest Daleks to quick backpedal. The Doctor then turned back to the Dalek Emperor, saying with a much pleasanter tone, "Okey doke. So, where were we?"

The Emperor continued from his earlier rant. "We waited here in the Dark Space, damaged but rebuilding. Centuries passed, and we quietly infiltrated the systems of Earth. Harvesting the waste of humanity. The prisoners, the refugees, the dispossessed—they all came to us. The bodies were filtered, pulped and sifted. The seed of the human race is perverted. Only one cell in a billion was fit to be nurtured."

At that point in time, I was tremendously grateful that I had a strong stomach. If I hadn't then the images that my mind was bombarded with surely would've caused me to empty my stomach right there on the Dalek ship.

"So, you created an army of Daleks out of the dead," The Doctor reviled.

"That makes them half human," I said boldly.

The Emperor Dalek turned on me. "Those words are blasphemy!"

"Do not blaspheme!" The other Daleks screeched in a mixture of unison and one after the other.

"I don't give a shit if it's blasphemous or not!" I shouted, even as Jack tried to quiet me. "Their origins are human, and nothing can change that!"

Again, the Emperor spoke, "Everything human has been purged. I cultivated pure and blessed Dalek."

The Doctor looked around at the Daleks in a panic. The look on his face clearly read 'disturbed'. "Since when did the Daleks have a concept of blasphemy?"

"I reached into the dirt and made new life. I am the god of all Daleks!"
The Daleks chanted, "Worship him! Worship him! Worship him!"

The Doctor turned back to me and Jack. "They're insane! A hundred years hiding in silence– that's enough to drive anyone mad."

I scoffed, "Since when aren't the Daleks insane?"

Looking sadly back at the Daleks, The Doctor walked towards them. "But it's worse than that. Driven mad by your own flesh. The stink of humanity." He shook his head in pity. "You hate your own existence. And that makes them more deadly than ever." He addressed the Emperor Dalek, "We're going." The Doctor calmly returned to the TARDIS, opening the door and ushering Jack inside first.

"You may not leave my presence!" the Emperor Dalek shouted.

The shouting didn't faze The Doctor one bit; he just lightly pecked my cheek and tapped my bum to get me inside the TARDIS quicker.

"Stay where you are!" A Dalek ordered.

The Doctor only offered a cheeky grin before shutting the TARDIS door.

The next time we stepped out of the TARDIS we were back on Satellite Five. Thankfully, we were not starring in any homicidal game shows this time. We were on Floor 500.

The Doctor rushed over to the controls, ordering, "Turn everything up. All transmissions, wide open, full power. Now! Do it!"

The man at the controls fumbled to do exactly what The Doctor said. "What does that do?"

"Stops the Daleks from transmatting on board," The Doctor explained. "How did you get on? Did you contact Earth?"

The man shook his head. "Well, we tried to warn them, but all they did was suspend our license because we stopped the programs."

The Doctor scowled. "And the planet's just sitting there, defenseless." A girl who was dressed in what must have been called fashionable by today's standards caught his attention. "Lynda, what're you still doing on board?" He frowned at the man at the controls. "I told you to evacuate everyone."

"She wouldn't go."

Lynda beamed up at The Doctor. "Didn't wanna leave ya."

For a moment, I was jealous of the blonde, but then I remembered her fate and decided that my pettiness could be saved for another day.

A woman dressed almost exactly like the man at the console walked forward. "There weren't enough shuttles anyway, or I wouldn't be here . . . we've got about a hundred people stranded on Floor Zero."

"Dahlia?" The Doctor asked quietly.
I already knew what he was asking. I didn't want to answer, but I did. "This is going to be a very, very bad day, Doctor."

The silence was broken by the man. "Oh, my God. The Fleet is moving. They're on their way."

As if those words were alarms, The Doctor immediately unfroze, ripping apart desks for the multitudes of wires inside and then shredding the wires apart. My gaze rapidly moved over his work, working over time with my brain in an attempt to make some sense of it so that I could help, but I had no luck. Instead, Jack and I ended up just trying not to get in The Doctor's way.

"Dalek plan—big mistake. Because what have they left me with? Anyone? Anyone? Oh, come on—it's obvious. A great big transmitter—this station," The Doctor rattled, not looking up from the mess of wires surrounding him.

Jack's face screwed up in concentration as he fought to discover whatever the Doctor was trying to hint at. I stayed silent.

"If I can change the signal, fold it back, sequence it—anyone?"

Jack huffed, "You've gotta be kidding."

"Give the man a medal!" The Doctor grinned.

"A Delta Wave?" Jack questioned.

"A Delta Wave," I assured him, nervously shifting from foot to foot and wiping my sweating palms on my denim-clad thighs.

"A Delta Wave!" The Doctor repeated excitedly.

Lynda frowned. "What's a Delta Wave?"

Shoving my hands in my pockets, I decided to explain, as a way to get my mind off of what I was going to have to do soon. "A wave of Van Cassadyne energy fries your brain—stand in the way of a Delta Wave, and your head gets barbequed."

She gulped. "That sounds . . . lovely."

"And this place can transmit a massive wave! Wipe out the Daleks!" The Doctor continued, using the sonic to reconnect a white wire.

"Well, get started and do it, then!" Lynda snapped.

"Trouble is," The Doctor said, frowning at the wires he was currently holding. "Wave this size, building this big, brain as clever as mine, should take about—ooh—three days? How long till the Fleet arrive?"

"Twenty-two minutes," the man at the desk replied.

The Doctor jerked a different cable out from under the console; he stared at it for several long moments before turning around to the rest of us and grinning ear to ear. We tried to stay out of his way as he started working again in earnest. At first, Jack was the only one with the slightest clue as to what The Doctor was trying to accomplish, but soon my brain caught up, and I was throwing mental guesses around, trying to see if I could finish his project before he did.

"We've now got a force field so they can't blast us out of the sky. But that doesn't stop the Daleks
from physically invading," The Doctor noted.

"Do they know about the Delta Wave?" the man asked.

We should really get his name.

Nodding, Jack replied, "They'll have worked it out at the same time. So, if they want to stop the Doctor, that means they've got to get to this level-500." He motioned to the complete floor plan of the station that was present on the screen. "Now, I can concentrate the extrapolator around the top six levels, 500 to 495. So, they'll penetrate the station below at level 494 and fight their way up."

"Is there any way to increase that?" I interrupted, going over the most likely way Jack would apply his plan.

Jack blinked and then frowned. "Well, there might be, but we would need something like The Doctor's sonic screwdriver and he needs his so . . ."

I raised an eyebrow. "Really?" I dug into my pocket, pulled out my sonic, flicked it into the air, and then caught it on its descent. "Would something like this help?" Good thing I snatched this up while in the TARDIS.

Jack's confused expression quickly changed into one of surprise and glee. "Perfect."

Jack ushered me over to a console that had so far been untouched by The Doctor, working his own brand of magic on the machinery as I assisted with my sonic and a few well-placed tips on how to get the most power out of the device that he was reprogramming.

While we worked, the man whose name we still didn't know approached us, keeping in mind to keep a safe enough distance away. "Who will they be fighting, sir?"

"Us," Jack answered simply.

"And . . . what're we fighting with?" the man asked.

"The guards had guns with basic bullets—that's enough to blow a Dalek wide open," Jack said.

The woman wrinkled her nose in disfavor. "There's five of us."

"The sonic will be able to ramp up the guns' power," I said. "I'm not sure by how much. I don't think it's ever been used like that before. I guess we'll see."

"Dahlia," The Doctor called out. "Can you help me over here? I need all these wires stripped bare."

Rolling my eyes, I handed my sonic to Jack, quickly instructing him on how to use it before trotting over to where The Doctor was sitting, completely surrounded by wires of all lengths, colors, and sizes. I settled in close to him and set into the job he apparently needed done.

"Right! Now there's four of us," the woman scoffed.

Jack sighed, but perked up right after, clapping his hand together loudly. "Then let's move it! Into the lift! Isolate the lift controls."

My stomach twisted. So close to the end—I needed to calm myself. Everything would turn out fine. I knew what I needed to do, I just needed to be brave . . . My hand trailed down to trace the fob watch in my pocket. Koschei was silent at the moment, which was strange. Normally at times when my heart rate increased Koschei would be chattier than usual. He was probably just giving
me space so I wouldn't be distracted; this was the most important event I had been a part of to date. While I understood that reasoning, I could really use the comforting tone of his voice right about now.

Lynda approached us while the man and woman hurried to the lift. The Doctor stood up so he could meet her properly and I stood with him. "I-I just wanna say, um . . . thanks, I s'pose. And . . . I'll do my best!" she stammered shyly.

"Me, too," The Doctor said back.

I almost didn't look at her. In the end, though, Lynda had earned enough of my respect for me to put away my pride and look her in the eyes as she went, most likely knowingly, to her death. So I looked her in the eye and held out my hand to her. "It has been my honor, Lynda."

She stared open-mouthed, her eyes flicking between my hand and my unwavering gaze for several long seconds. She seemed to come to her senses, slightly shaking her head and shaking my hand while she fumbled over her words. "Oh . . . um, yes, mine, too! Sorry, I just didn't expect . . ."

I offered her a smile. No need to startle her any more than she already was. "That's all right. I understand." I started to release her trembling hand, only to grip in firmer and then clasp it in both of mine. "Don't panic, breathe deeply, and aim for the eye-stalk. That's the only weak spot in their armor." Taking a deep breath myself, I gave Lynda one last smile before slowly releasing her hand. "Good luck down there."

Lynda bravely blinked away the tears that had started forming in her eyes enough to return my smile with a quivering one of her own. "Thank you," she whispered, nearly mouthing the words, finally letting go of my hand and heading toward the lift.

I felt the heavy weight of The Doctor's eyes on me and waited for him to say something, like I knew he would. Instead, though, all he did was curl an arm around my shoulders and bring me closer to him to settle his chin on my head, silently offering comfort.

Then Jack approached. It was easy to tell that he was trying not to think about what was about to happen. "It's been fun!" Jack said lightly, but the tone didn't last long. He quickly turned serious. "But I guess this is goodbye."

Swallowing down the knot in my throat, I desperately tried not to cry, biting my bottom lip to stop its quivering. Jack smiled sadly at me. Scooping me up in another embrace and burying his face in my neck, Jack muttered, "Aw, sweetheart, don't cry. I'm just some conman you guys picked up. Nobody important. No need to shed tears over me."

I dug my fingers into his ribs in retaliation, managing a watery giggle at his yelp. Jack's grip loosened for a split second before tightening enough so that he could lift me off the ground. When he set me back on the ground, Jack pulled away to take my face in both his hands and kiss me. It wasn't a romantic kiss by any means. In fact, it felt more like a platonic kiss . . . was that a thing? That should be a thing.

After pulling away from me, Jack turned to The Doctor with a grin. "Wish I'd never met you, Doctor!" he said, cupping The Doctor's face like he had mine. "I was much better off as a coward." Jack then leaned in and kissed The Doctor, kissing him in the same way he had kissed me. When Jack pulled away, The Doctor held him there with a hand cradling his jaw. The Doctor's gaze swept over Jack's face and a sad smile tugged at his mouth.

"You know the one thing I regret?" The Doctor asked quietly.
Jack snorted. "Saving me?"

The Doctor shook his head. "No." He gave Jack another light kiss. "That I didn't give that threesome a chance."

That got Jack laughing. Jack laughed until he was wheezing and out of breath. Wiping tears from his eyes, Jack grinned at both of us. "Yeah, wish we could have worked something out but no hard feelings, Doc." Jack put an arm around each of our shoulders and pointed toward the lift. "See ya in hell." And then he was gone, joining the others in the lift to travel to the lower levels and fight.

It was only after Jack left that I realized he hadn't given me my sonic back.

"Shit," I spat, slapping my forehead with my palm.

"What is it?" The Doctor asked cautiously.

Sighing, I settled back down between the rows of consoles to help him. "Jack still has my sonic. I forgot to get it back from him."

"Ah," The Doctor mumbled. "You can just build another in the TARDIS. No biggie."

I stiffened. "Now?"

"If ya want, yeah," he said.

"I won't need it. I can wait until after we're done here," I muttered back, stripping a set of wires with more force than was strictly necessary.

Silence settled in while we worked. Then The Doctor spoke again, "Another thing we could do with the TARDIS . . . it could take us away . . ."

A sad smile crossed my face but I didn't look up.

"We could leave. Let history take its course. We could go to Marbella in 1989."

"We could . . . but you would never do that," I hummed.

The Doctor stared at me. "I would if you asked me," The words he continued with weren't what I expected. "That's all it would take, just a few words for your mouth, and I'd do anything."

I stiffened immediately. Why was he telling me this?

"You know that, don't you, Dahlia? That there's nothing I wouldn't do if you asked?" he asked, practically begging me with his eyes. I didn't look at him for long; I knew that if I did, I would crumble and ask him what he desperately wanted me to. He sighed dejectedly, his shoulders falling sadly with the action. "It never occurred to you, did it?"

I gave him a sad smile. "No. I'd never ask that of you."

He smiled back. "How'd I end up with someone as perfect as you?"

"A series of unfortunate events," I snorted. "And I'm not perfect."
"To me you are."

A computer whirred to life in the background, bringing both of us back to the awful reality of where we were. "The Delta Wave's started building. How long does it need?" The Doctor stood and walked over to the computer. His hopeful expression dropped immediately when he saw the screen.

"Doctor?" I called out. "It's bad news, isn't it?" I watched his head slowly fall to rest on his knees. I swallowed thickly and turned back to the wires, only to fix my blank stare on them.

"You know what I'm going to do next," The Doctor said quietly.

"Yes," I replied in monotone.

"You're going to fight, aren't you?"

"Of course."

"Why?"

"You know why."

I was curled in on myself by now. I hated this. I didn't want to be forced to leave The Doctor here. I didn't want to look into the heart of the TARDIS. I didn't want the universe to collapse because I was too scared to do what I was brought here to do.

Suddenly, hands grabbed me under my arms and lifted me into the air. The Doctor threw me over his shoulder and began walking towards the TARDIS. As soon as I realized this, I began thrashing as hard as I could in his grip, kicking out my legs and slamming my fists into his back in an attempt to get him to drop me.

"Dahlia, please stop," The Doctor said hoarsely.

I ignored him in favor of continuing my struggling. I knew it was a pointless effort; The Doctor was a Time Lord and that made him physically stronger than any human. There was no way I could get out of his grip unless he let me out.

"Put me down! Doctor, please!" I begged. "Please don't make me leave! Doctor!"

We were inside the TARDIS now. The Doctor had walked up the ramp and placed me down by the console. As soon as my feet hit the floor, I attempted to jerk away from him, but of course he still had a tight grip around my wrist. The Doctor tugged me closer to the console while I continued to fight him. Something cold clicked into place around my wrist, and The Doctor's overly warm hand released me. The fight drained out of me; my breath felt like it was being forcefully wrenched from my lungs. As The Doctor moved in front of me, I slowly looked behind me at my wrist where a shiny, silver handcuff kept me shackled to the console. Turning back around, I locked eyes with a despairing Time Lord.

I attempted a smile, but I could feel that it turned out as a grimace. So, instead of attempting to comfort him with a smile, I used my free hand to cradle The Doctor's face, lightly stroking his cheek.

His hand came up and clasped mine, stilling any movement. "I'm sorry," he whispered.

I swallowed thickly when my eyes began burning with tears to match the ones welling up in The Doctor's eyes. "It's all right," I said back just as roughly.
"No, it's not," he choked out. "You may know why I'm doing this but that doesn't make it right." He leaned in and cupped my face in his hands. The Doctor didn't kiss me like I expected him to. Instead, his fingertips gently touched my temples, and his forehead rested against mine.

A wave of nearly overpowering emotion washed over me, engulfing and almost drowning me.

I could feel and understand every one of The Doctor's emotions going through his mind right here and right now. Guilt, anger, fury, doubt, self-loathing, hate, pity, grief, self-doubt, peace, sorrow, love, worship, remorse . . . Everything was swirling in a maddening hurricane of too much at once. It threatened to consume me, but The Doctor broke away before that could happen. Even when he believed he was going to die, he was still thinking about my safety.

"Theta . . ." I whispered, opening my eyes to stare into his.

The Doctor inhaled deeply and then exhaled. "Dahlia, please . . . please, just . . . just stay with the Tylers. Don't come back. Please." He gently kissed me. "Stay safe and . . . be happy." Then he turned away and walked out of the TARDIS.

I found my voice right when he was closing the door. "I'm coming back." The Doctor looked up in surprise. "That's a promise. So don't get too comfortable here."

He just sadly shook his head and gently clicked the door shut. The TARDIS's engines started up right after that. A few minutes later, The Doctor's hologram message appeared.

"This is Emergency Program One. Dahlia, now listen, this is important. If this message is activated, then it can only mean one thing. We must be in danger. And I mean fatal. I'm dead or about to die any second with no change of escape. And that's okay. Hope it's a good death. But I promised to look after you, and that's what I'm doing. The TARDIS is taking you home. And I bet you're fussing and moaning now—typical. But hold on and just listen a bit more. The TARDIS can never return for me. Emergency Program One means I'm facing an enemy that should never get their hands on this machine. So this is what you should do: let the TARDIS die."

I scowled at the hologram, baring my teeth as if he could actually see me. "Never. If I didn't know what I had to do, I would just fly her myself, you idiot."

The hologram didn't pause for my angry comment. "Just let this old box gather dust. No one can open it. No one will even notice it. Let it become a strange little thing standing on a street corner. And over the years, the world will move on, and the box will be buried. And if you want to remember me, then you can do one thing. That's all. One thing." The hologram managed to face me exactly where I was standing, catching my angry stare with a compassionate one of his own. "Have a good life. Do that for me, Dahlia. Have a fantastic life. And remember how much I care for you, even if I could never tell you." The hologram disappeared.

The TARDIS came to a halt. I stared at the console, blinking slowly.

"So . . ." I murmured. "Are you gonna open the console up or do I have to wrench you open myself?" The TARDIS hummed and whirred. I snorted. "Fine then." I twisted my wrist, causing the chain on the cuffs to jingle. "Would you at least unlock the cuffs?"

The TARDIS was silent for several minutes. In those minutes, my temper threatened to boil over, but I managed to not explode. The TARDIS's decision became obvious when the cuff on my wrist clicked open and clattered back against the console. I was out the door seconds after, running at top speed to find Ashley, Jackie, and Mickey as soon as possible. I didn't get very far before I ran straight into Ashley.
We almost collapsed to the ground, but Mickey was there, catching and righting us.

"I knew it! I was all the way down Clifton's Parade, and I heard the engines and I thought 'there's only one thing that makes a noise like that'," Mickey laughed, hugging me.

Ashley's smile fell soon after she saw my face. "Dahlia, what's wrong?" Mickey sensed the change and broke away from me. "What happened?" Ashley asked. "Where's The Doctor?"

I managed to calm my racing heart and sputtered out, "He's stuck in the future. He sent me back here so that I wouldn't die. I need your help to open the TARDIS console."

"What? Dahlia, what do you mean? What kind of trouble is he in? Why would he send you back but not come back with you?" Ashley demanded.

"Please! I don't have time to answer your questions!" I shouted. "I need your help!"

Ashley and Mickey gaped at me. Ashley regained her wits first, snapping her jaw shut and firmly nodding her head. "What do we need to do?"

Mickey was quick to agree. "Anything you need. We'll do whatever it takes."

I slumped forward. "We need to pull the console open. I'll go ahead and warn you that only I can be there when it does open."

"Why?" they both asked at the time, their faces contorted by confusion.

I shook my head. "It's too much to explain right now, just know that no one is supposed to look into the heart of the TARDIS and that exactly what I'm going to do."

"What will happen to you?" Ashley asked hesitantly.

My heart rate picked up again. "I don't really know. The only thing I know for sure is that I'll be the most powerful being in the universe for a short period of time. And that the power will eventually kill me." Realizing what I had said, I attempted to assure Ashley, "Everything will be fine, though. Don't worry."

She smiled weakly. "You know that only makes me worry more."

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I wanted to immediately ask Jackie for assistance, but I knew she wouldn't help, not until she had reason to. So I instructed Mickey to chain his car to the console and to floor it. There was no hope of the poor little Beetle opening the console, but Mickey and Ashley wanted to try it anyway.

"Faster, Mickey!" Ashley ordered as she peeked inside the TARDIS. She was waiting outside like I had requested, ready to bolt at the first sign of the console opening. "Faster!"

I heard the chain shriek, managing to dive out of the way before the broken link managed to slam into my unprotected shin.

"Shit!" Ashley screamed. Mickey repeated that seconds later.

"What's all this then?"

Perfect. Jackie was here.
"We're trying to get the TARDIS console open for Dahlia, Mum."

Jackie snorted. "Why would ya be doin' that? The Doctor sent her back here for a reason, didn't he?"

I don't know why, but something in me snapped at those words even though I expected something like them. I stormed out of the TARDIS and got right up Jackie's face.

"Don't you ever repeat those words, Jackie Tyler. Ever. Yes, The Doctor sent me back here but only because he doesn't believe I have a solution. I promised him that I would come back, and I'll be damned if I don't keep that promise," I said.

"Sweetheart . . ."

"No!" I snapped. "If you were in my shoes and your husband was the one trapped in the future, waiting to die, not only to save you, but everyone, you would do the exact same thing!"

"Sweetheart, no one as young as you should have to carry that sort of responsibility," Jackie tried to soothe me.

I sneered. "What, the safety of one man? Jackie, I have the responsibility of this entire dimension on my shoulders! You, Ashley, Mickey, hell, the inhabitants of every single planet are relying on me to do what I was brought here to do, and I won't let them down. Besides, what gives you the right to believe that one girl can't make a difference?"

Ashley managed to catch my eye. She seemed to be looking for permission, and I gave it.

"Mum," Ashley said, taking a deep breath. "I have something to tell you . . ."

I retreated back into the TARDIS. I could still hear the conversation, but I couldn't stay there. If I did, I would probably blow up at Jackie again and only make things worse. I heard Jackie run off in tears; Ashley calling out to her and then leaving as well in order to think.

Not knowing what to do with my time, I dug out the fob watch from my pocket. I traced over the patterns on its surface. "Koschei, I wish you would talk to me. I need to know I'm doing this right—that I'll get through this and not royally fuck up the universe." I sighed and collapsed against the console, trailing down to sit on the metal grating. "Any sort of sign would be enough."

"Dahlia?" Mickey called. He appeared in the doorway seconds later and entered the TARDIS, walking up the ramp toward me. "What're you doing?"

"Nothing," I said, quickly stuffing the watch back on my pocket.

He gave me a suspicious look but offered a hand to me. I took it, and we walked outside. Ashley was leaning against Mickey's car, staring at the ground with a bleak expression.

"Maybe my mum was right . . . maybe we should just lock the door and walk away," she sighed.

Mickey frowned. "I'm not having that. I'm not having you just—just give up now. No way. We just need something stronger than my car . . . something bigger . . . something like that!"

A huge recovery truck was driving right toward us with Jackie in the driver's seat. She parked the monster of a vehicle and climbed out of it. "Right. You've only got this until six o' clock, so get on with it."
"Mum, where the hell did you get that from?" Ashley gaped.

Jackie smiled. "Rodrigo. He owes me a favor. Never mind why, but Ashley, you were right about your dad. He was full of mad ideas, and this is exactly what he would've done." She looked at me. "Dahlia, you're right. I would have done anything to keep Pete from dying. That's why I'm helping you." Lurching forward, she wrapped me in a tight hug and told me, "He would've liked you. Not taking crap from anyone and always willin' to do what was right for the people you care about. I'm only helpin' ya because you're Ashley's friend, and I've got no idea what the hell is really goin' on, but I know it's important. Now, get on with it before I change my mind." She tossed Mickey the keys. He caught them with a nod of thanks and climbed into the cab.

"Jackie . . ." My breath hitched as I held in a sob. "Thank you." I hugged her tightly. "Everything will be fine, make sure Ashley understands that." Then I was rushing back to the TARDIS with the chain in hand. I attached it to the vent where the first chain had been and shouted for Mickey to floor it. The chain was pulled taut by the tension, threatening to snap just like the first one.

"Put your foot down!" Jackie ordered.

"Faster!"

"Give it some more, Mickey!"

Man, those Tyler women sure knew how to yell. No wonder The Doctor was frightened of them. But the encouragement was working. The faster the recovery truck's wheels spun, the more the metal of the console groaned and shrieked.

"Keep going!" I shouted.

Jackie and Ashley were relentless. "Come on! Come on!"

"Almost there!" I could see the metal slowly pulling apart centimeter by centimeter.

Jackie screamed one last time and, as if it had been personally insulted by her, the console was wrenched apart at the seam. Blinding golden light washed over me from the gape in the metal as I looked into the heart of the TARDIS. I hadn't expected to physically feel the TARDIS reach out to me; the mental part was expected, but I could feel her enter my body through my eyes and mouth. The two streams of light that entered my eyes took a shortcut directly to my brain, layering it in a crystalline fog and leaving it clearer than ever before at the same time. The huge cloud that I had inhaled quickly spread through my entire body, numbing and giving me an out of body feeling, like my soul was hovering half outside of my physical form.

Someone tentatively called for me from outside the TARDIS. With a thought, the door snapped shut. Another person screamed for the Odd Girl again. Wait . . . no, they were screaming for me. But I was the Odd Girl. That was what the TARDIS referred to me as. I was the one who took care of her Thief.

The Blonde One was pounding at the doors now, but I ignored her. I needed to return to Satellite Five. I pictured Floor 500 and started the engines. *Hold on, Doctor. I'll be there soon.*

It was strange, flying the TARDIS like this. I could feel The Vortex surrounding me, transporting us where we were needed. I bent it to my will, directing the TARDIS exactly where I wanted her, even down to the section of flooring I wanted her to materialize on upon landing.

She landed where I told her to, and the light inside the TARDIS brightened to near blinding levels. A breeze that came from nowhere swirled my hair around my face as I slightly moved my hand,
flinging the doors open. As I stepped out of the TARDIS, my vision narrowed down to only The Doctor, who had stumbled backwards and fallen to the ground.

"What did you do?" he asked fearfully.

I stared at him with glowing eyes, tilting my head as I did so. "I looked into the TARDIS, and she looked into me." Wasn't that obvious? How else would I be here?

"You looked into the Time Vortex." Not a question, more like a terrified statement. "Dahlia, no one's meant to see that."

I was going to reply, to tell him I already knew that, but the Dalek Emperor decided to start screaming instead.

"This is the abomination!"

"Exterminate!" a Dalek shrieked from its spot, firing at me right after.

I stopped the death ray with my hand and reflected it back to the Dalek, destroying and killing it with no effort. Turning back to face The Doctor, I stated monotonously, "I am Bad Wolf. I will create myself. I take the words . . ." Lifting my hand, I waved it at the words Bad Wolf. "I scatter them in time and space." The two words floated off the wall and disappeared. "A message to remind myself of my purpose and to lead you where you need to be."

"Dahlia," The Doctor pleaded desperately, "you've got to stop this. You've got to stop this now."

Facing him, I tried to open my mouth to speak. I knew that. I knew I had to stop. There was a reason for that; I knew there was, but I couldn't remember it. Something burned and throbbed white hot against my upper thigh. Whatever the object was, it was painful but reassuring. How could something be both?

"Dahlia? Dahlia, please! You've got the entire vortex running through your head. You're gonna burn!"

"I want you safe," I murmured. I wasn't crying, but the burning wasn't stopping in my thigh. An inferno was raging in my abdomen and chest, through my lungs and into my heart, and I didn't know how to stop it. "My Doctor. Protected from the false God."

"You cannot hurt me. I am immortal!" the Emperor sneered.

Blinking slowly, I stared at him. "You are tiny. I can see the whole of time and space. Every single atom of your pathetic little existence . . . and I divide them." I lifted my hand and calmly splayed my fingers. One by one every Dalek in the fleet disintegrated into golden dust particles, floating like ash out into space. "Everything must come to dust . . . all things. Everything dies. The Time War ends." I felt every single Dalek as they died out. It wasn't a painful loss, more of a peaceful one that lightened the universe.

The Doctor approached me cautiously. "Dahlia," he cleared his throat, "you've done it. Now stop. Just let go."

But I shook my head. "Not yet, Doctor. Not yet. I'm not finished . . ." I whispered, locating Jack on the Satellite. I only had to will it, and he was alive again, gasping for air and staring around in confusion. I tilted my head to the side again and inhaled deeply. "Now, I'm done."

"Now let go. Please, just, let go," he begged.
Yes, but how did one go about letting go of the greatest power in the universe? It didn't even hurt as badly as I thought it would. Sure, there was burning and sharp stabs of pain every once in a while, but there wasn't any real danger, was there? "Why should I? I have the power to change anything . . . I could bring back your people. The Time Lock would be no match for me, nor the Daleks or the mad rulers of Gallifrey." I faced The Doctor. "Would that make you happy, Doctor? Would that make the pain in your hearts disappear, along with the guilt?"

For a moment, just a moment, I saw The Doctor truly consider my offer. In those few seconds, I watched him realize exactly how much power I had at my fingertips and that I would use it all for him if he asked.

"All you have to do is say yes, Doctor," I whispered, shifting closer to him, breathing his air. "One word, that's all it takes, and I'll bring back Gallifrey for you."

He was breathing heavily now. The weight of the decision pulling him down. I almost regretted offering, but I wanted him to realize all of his options before I let go of Bad Wolf and returned to being little human Dahlia.

"What is your answer, Doctor?"

The Doctor's entire body quivered, but his gaze was firm, even if his voice couldn't be. "No."

Blinking in confusion, I tilted my head and asked, "No?"

"No," he repeated.

"Why?" I asked lightly.

"I won't ask you to do that. I won't force you to fix the consequences of my actions." He took a deep breath. "Now please, just let go of it, Dahlia. Come back to me."

"Will that make you happy?" I asked softly, stroking his cheek with my right hand.

"Yes," he choked out.

"Then that is what I'll do." Frowning, I located where the mass of energy was mostly concentrated. It shouldn't be that hard to get rid of it, right? I mean, it was right there. I should just be able to tell it to fuck off . . . why wasn't it leaving? Fuck. Now it was hurting worse than ever. No matter how much I pushed and pulled at the energy, it still wouldn't leave.

"Doctor . . . I . . . it won't leave," I panted. Sweat was building up all over my body, and my heart was beginning to stutter.

The Doctor pulled me in close and rested his head on top of mine. "The power's gonna kill you, and it's my fault."

"No. No, it's not. This is what's supposed to happen. Everything is right with the universe now. It's safe." I winced. "Even if it's giving me a massive fucking headache."

He chuckled weakly. "That's what I see. All the time. And doesn't it drive you mad?"

Squinting my eyes form the pain, I said gruffly, "It's not that bad. It just hurts so much because I'm human, and my physiology isn't equipped to handle this sort of . . . stuff."

"I think you need a doctor," The Doctor said and I couldn't help but giggle lightheartedly at him.
"I always thought that was such a cheesy line . . . but you are right."

That managed to get a smile, but I didn't get to see it for long. The Doctor was kissing me passionately, not at all like he had kissed Rose on the show. His hand buried itself in my wild hair; his free hand cupped my jaw and tilted it at the angle he wanted me. The burning energy inside on me slowly moved from my body and into The Doctor's the longer we kissed; I was also becoming more and more lightheaded. I pulled away to gasp for air as my vision started turning black at the edges. My knees buckled and collapsed from under me, but The Doctor caught me, hauling me into his arms just when I blacked out.

I woke up in the TARDIS on the captain's chair. The Doctor was carding his fingers through my hair and staring at me with a small smile.

"Hello," The Doctor said.

"Mm . . . morning." I yawned, sitting up and rubbing my eyes.

The Doctor watched me carefully. Probably for any signs that I was going to black out again. "Do you remember anything?"

Rolling my shoulders, I sighed, "Remembering and reciting what I knew what was gonna happen are two entirely different things, Doctor. Give me a minute to get my head sorted." He did as I asked, staying silent while I rubbed my temples and sorted out what was real and what was from the TV verse.

Finally, I replied, "I remember most of what happened. But one thing's still fuzzy . . . did I offer to bring back Gallifrey for you?"

The Doctor stared at the floor.

"Doctor, just answer the question."

"Yes, you did," he answered bluntly.

"And you said no," I hummed, rolling my neck. "All right then." I stood and walked over to him.

The Doctor attempted to speak, but I shushed him, wrapping my arms around his middle and hugging him close. He returned the gesture, if a bit more confused.

"It's all right that you said no. I understand. You don't have to explain yourself to me. I just want to enjoy the last few moments I have with you before you regenerate," I mumbled into his jumper.

"Dahlia Tombew . . ." he sighed. "I was gonna take you to so many places. Barcelona—not the city Barcelona, the planet. You'd love it. Fantastic place—they've got dogs with no noses." He chuckled into my hair. "Imagine how many times a day you end up telling that joke, and it's still funny."

"We can still do that, even after you regenerate."

He clutched me tighter to his chest. "Will you still feel the same way about me afterwards?"

Furrowing my eyebrows, I burrowed my fingers in his jumper. "Of course. You might have a different face, and your quirks might be different, but the memories will still be the same. I'm not
saying I won't need time to adjust. I'm only human, ya know, and even if I know it'll still be you, I'll need a little time to get used to it. But yes, my feelings will stay the same."

"That's good to know, because it's happening now."

"I guess I should get back then . . . "I muttered, but before I did, I kissed Nine for the last time. It was odd, knowing that this was the last time I would see this regeneration, yet alone kiss him. After breaking the kiss, I buried my face in his neck and inhaled his scent in an attempt to memorize it.

"Dahlia . . . I can't . . . you need to move . . . " The Doctor grunted.

I did so, nearly toppling over in my attempt to move away so as to not be caught up in the blast. Not long after my frantic movement, The Doctor coughed up a ball of golden light. He winced in pain and clutched at his chest. I wanted to help, but I knew there was nothing I could do for him. So I clutched at the rails to steady myself and watched without breathing.

"I absorbed all the energy of the Time Vortex, and no one's meant to do that!" His eyes screwed shut in pain. "Every cell in my body's dying." He managed to open his eyes and stare into mine. "I'm not gonna see you again. Not like this. Not with this daft old face." He attempted to laugh and I managed a smile for him. "And before I go . . ."

A sob swelled in my chest and managed to burst free. I released one of my hands from gripping the rails to hold over my mouth to try and stop myself from crying. It didn't work.

"Dahlia . . . Before I go, I just wanna tell you, you were fantastic." The Doctor grinned. "Absolutely fantastic. And d'you know what? So was I." And then he exploded. His entire body was consumed by golden energy as his body regenerated.

I was forced to turn away; my eyes were still sensitive from Bad Wolf. There was no way I could handle watching the Doctor regenerate.

It seemed like as soon as it had started, it was over. The light and wind disappeared, and I was left blinking bewilderingly around the room while my vision cleared.

"Hello! Okay—oo!" Ten ran his tongue along his teeth and frowned. "New teeth. That's weird."

I wiped away the tears that had traitorously spilled over from my eyes. *Pull yourself together, Dahlia. Can't let The Doctor see you being all weepy. And what the fuck is that burning against my leg?* I hadn't noticed before in all the excitement, but there was definitely something burning and pulsing against my thigh. But it would have to wait. Ten was still examining his new body and had just seemed to remember that I was still there.

"Dahlia?" he asked quietly, still ready to bubble over with energy but subdued for the moment while he waited for my judgment on his new body. "You know it's still me, right? I'm still The Doctor."

I took a few hesitant steps forward, slowly shuffling towards him until I was standing barely a foot away. "I—I know that . . . just . . . well, I *told* you that I would need some time to adjust, you stupid face!" I grumbled halfheartedly. I ran my hand up the front of the leather jacket. It didn't fit him anymore; in fact, the huge clothing hung off his now skinny frame. "I'm human, you twat, I can't just hop all aboard the regeneration train like it's no big deal for me."

"When I asked you if your feelings would change, the same went for me, too," he muttered. "I still feel the same way about you, even if I can't actually say it."
Smiling, I trailed my fingers onto his chest, moving over both his hearts. Both of his heartbeats sped up at my touch, causing me to giggle.

"Anything I can do to speed up the process?" he asked, leaning in closer and staring at me with those big brown eyes.

My breath hitched, and I was suddenly hit by just how attractive I found this regeneration. "I-I'm not s-sure . . . maybe it's just, uh, one of those things that t-takes time, ya know?"

"Maybe this will help." And then he kissed me. Of course, should've seen that coming, but it was welcome all the same. I could taste the regeneration energy still on his tongue. When we pulled apart, I really didn't know what to say. All I managed to get out was, "New mouth . . . that's definitely weird."

The Doctor laughed and spun me around. "So, now that that's taken care of!" He leaped to the console. "Barcelona!"
"Doctor!" I screamed at the top of my lungs. I was clutching the console as tightly as I could, desperately trying to hold on for dear life as the TARDIS shook, trembled, and thrashed with the newly regenerated Doctor's manic driving. "Doctor, we need to get back to Earth!"

"Yes! Of course! Earth! That's the place we need to go! Everything depends on us getting to Earth!" The Doctor rambled excitedly. He stopped what he was doing and blinked rapidly at me. "Why do we need to go to Earth?"

Growling out my annoyance and frustration under my breath, I attempted to explain while I reached for different controls on the console. "Because you've just regenerated and are currently too mad to be walking around, let alone operating the TARDIS. The sooner we get to Earth, the sooner you can get yourself sorted out into a slightly saner mind." Luckily, The Doctor's pause in activity gave me the perfect opportunity to reprogram the TARDIS for a swift but uncomplicated landing on Earth.

My explanation seemed to jar The Doctor's memory because as soon as I finished speaking, Ten's insane grin was back in place, and he was reaching across the console in every direction, undoing my programming even as I slapped at his hands with my free one.

"Doctor, no!" I snapped. His meddling had caused the TARDIS to jerk back and forth, forcing me away from the console and then snapping me back against it; the air whooshed out of my lungs from the impact against the unyielding metal. Coughing and gasping to regain my breath, I wheezed, "I already programmed her."

The Doctor scoffed, "She's my TARDIS. I'll fly her like I want to."

Scowling, I snapped, "Well, you're doing a piss poor job of it!" The TARDIS groaned in agreement, tilting to one side and nearly flipping over in the process. Arguing with The Doctor was pointless. The only thing I could do was switch on the monitor and try to keep the TARDIS from crashing into any buildings before she could land.

Easier said than done.

Normally when I assisted The Doctor in flying the TARDIS, there was some pattern to his movements, but now his choices in button or lever was purely by chance. If I prepared to shift the TARDIS right, he pressed some combination that did the same thing, forcing the TARDIS to jerk too far to the right and nearly through a window.

"Doctor, I swear to the Aldermi Dominion that if you don't land this fucking TARDIS right now, I will shove your sonic so far up your ass that you'll rename it a sonic probe!" I snarled.

Only then did the TARDIS seem to gain some semblance of direction in its wild flight. The Doctor had the look of a highly panicked goose while he flailed in different directions in order to land the TARDIS as quickly as possible.

The engines ground together noisily as they always did when the TARDIS landed. My stomach churned, whatever contents it still possessed sloshing against my stomach lining and the inside of the esophagus. Vertigo was not nor would ever be my friend. I had to keep a firm grip on the console to make sure I didn't trip over my own feet and collapse onto the floor or spew my guts all over the poor TARDIS. I could still hear The Doctor's insane chattering, but it sounded so far away
to my ears. I was too preoccupied with how the world was tilting to pay any attention to whatever nonsense he was spouting.

The TARDIS doors banged open, signaling to me that The Doctor had exited the TARDIS.

Fuck, I thought. I needed to get outside. I had to make sure The Doctor was all right.

I stumbled to the doors, clutching tightly to the rails to keep my balance. It didn't help that I was still hindered by the throbbing burn in my thigh. I finally managed to make it outside. The Doctor was twirling around, babbling excitedly to Jackie, Ashley, and Mickey, all of whom were staring at him like he was an alien. For once they were doing something fitting of the situation.

"Dahlia!" Ashley nearly shouted when she caught sight of me.

That caught The Doctor's attention. "Here we are, then!" he called out. "London! Earth! The Solar System! We did it!" He finally seemed to catch sight of Jackie, Ashley, and Mickey. "Jackie! Ashley! Mickey! Blimey! No, no, no, no, hold on." Stumbling a few steps backwards, The Doctor searched for the right words. "Wait there, I've got something to say. There was something I had to tell you. Something important, what was it? No, hold on, hold on . . . " The Doctor slung an arm around Jackie and Mickey's shoulders. "Hold on, shush, shush, shush, shush . . . Oh!" he suddenly shouted, causing Jackie, Mickey, and Ashley to jump in shock. "I know!" He twirled around to face them. "Merry Christmas!"

I dove forward to catch him right as he fell, just managing to get one of his arms around my shoulders before he completely collapsed. "Damn, you're heavy."

"Who is he? Where's The Doctor?" Mickey asked. "Dahlia?"

Grunting with the effort of holding The Doctor's weight, I said, "This is The Doctor. He regenerated, that's all."

"Dahlia, it's been months since we last saw you. What happened? How long's it been for you? And what do you mean regenerated?" Ashley rapidly questioned, ducking under The Doctor's other arm to help me with his weight.

"I'll tell you later. Only a few hours at most. Time Lords can stop themselves from dying by a process that completely changes their appearance and personality," I replied. "This man's The Doctor. Help me get him inside."

Jackie protested, "What d'ya mean he's The Doctor? Doctor who?"

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The Doctor was sleeping peacefully in Ashley's bed; he was dressed in a pair of striped pajamas that Jackie had lying about. I didn't ask her where they were from. I already knew that and really didn't want her explanation. And yes, I had been the one to change him into the pajamas. When I had suggested it, Jackie and Mickey were scandalized.

"Sweetheart, there's no need for you to have to do that! Mickey had just do it," Jackie had said.

I rolled my eyes. "Jackie, I've seen him naked. Well, not this body, but you get the point."

"What?" she had shrieked.
"Guess I forgot to tell you that me and The Doctor are together," I said. "And yeah, that does mean we're in a relationship. We've been together for a few months."

"When were you gonna tell us?" she demanded.

"Uh . . . I think Ashley knows, maybe Mickey. I'm not sure . . ."

Jackie glared. "Oh, so only I was left out of the loop. So when was I gonna be told that you decided to shack up with The Doctor?"

"Probably never if you were gonna act like this," I mumbled.

After that, Jackie had stomped off at Ashley's request for her to try and find a stethoscope for me to use. Ashley was now standing just in the doorway, watching me pet The Doctor's hair.

"So this guy really is The Doctor," Ashley noted quietly.

"Yeah."

She coughed. "Kinda hard to believe that, but you're the expert here. And I guess it isn't all that hard to believe that he can change his appearance if he's an alien and you're from another dimension." She sighed deeply. "I never thought any of this was possible. Aliens, time travel, other dimensions . . . there's so much I don't know. There's so much new stuff, so much to process. I don't know what to think or what to do. The only thing I can agree on is to let you handle it."

My hand paused in its movement. "Ashley . . ."

"No, Dahlia, I don't mean it how you think I do. Sometimes, yeah, I wish I could be of more use. I wish I wasn't so . . . trapped in this little box of a world. In that way of thinkin', yeah? But other times, most of the time . . . I wish I knew more. That I understood more. I want to be able to think like you and not be in the dark all the time and just waitin' for you to solve the problem. I want to be helpful, yeah, Dahlia, but it's not just that."

I heard her footsteps and then she was sliding into the free chair on the other side of the bed. Ashley stared into my eyes, and I froze. I had never seen Ashley this determined. Her eyes were steel and her mouth a fine line.

"I want to learn," she said slowly.

I didn't know what to say to that. Did she mean what I thought she meant or was this just a burst of courage before the collapse?

"Dahlia." Ashley leaned in closer. "Please. Teach me. I know that we'll have to start off slow because of me being narrow minded, but please. I-I thought about askin' The Doctor, but I think we both know how that would work out." She laughed, though it seemed slightly forced.

"No! No-no-no, no, no . . . I know what you're getting' at. I-I've been thinkin' about this for a while, months, actually. The first time I thought about it was a little bit after the first time you came back and what happened at 10 Downing Street. At that point it was just a small thought. I wanted to help you, or to at least be able to understand what the hell was goin' on around me. You and The Doctor, hell, even Mickey knows more than I do! The only one who knows less than me is Mum. What
really sealed the deal was, um, when the Doctor took me back to . . . to see my dad." Ashley paused to take a shaky breath. "When—when those creatures came . . . all I could think was that it was my fault. It was my fault people were dyin' and that the world was endin'. If you had been there instead of me, none of that would've happened, because you know what's allowed and what's not." Inhaling deeply to try and steady herself (I knew because I had done the exact same thing too many times before), Ashley looked up. "If this is going to be my life now, I need to be prepared. Please, teach me." She gripped my free hand. "Please," she whispered desperately.

I couldn't keep her stare for long; I looked away to stare blankly at the space next to The Doctor's head. Dazedly, I traced my lower lip with my tongue and swallowed the lump that had formed in my throat.

"Okay," I breathed out. Nodding, I repeated myself, "Okay. I'll do it." I turned back to Ashley. "It won't be easy learning all this, but you seem to already know that. We'll have to figure something out for when The Doctor and I leave again. Maybe video chatting? I'll need to ramp up your Internet connection and computers before that, but it should work. We'll probably just start out with some books that cover the basics of time travel in general. Don't worry, I'll make sure they aren't too boring or complicated. Maybe there's something in the TARDIS library that can help . . ." My mind was starting to wander, but I stopped myself before I got too far into it. For the moment, we had more pressing matters. After the current upcoming crisis was dealt with, then I would be able to arrange something with Ashley.

The front door opened and closed with a crash. Ashley and I both jumped, startled by the loud noise, and looked to the doorway. Jackie appeared there, holding a stethoscope.

"Here we go. Tina the Cleaner's got this lodger, medical student. And she was fast asleep, so I just took it," Jackie said, handing the item to me as she sat down on the edge of the bed. "Though, I still say we should take him to hospital."

Putting the stethoscope in my ears, I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. "He's an alien, Jackie. No matter how much he looks human, he's Gallifreyan. There's no way we'd be able to hide that from the doctors once they started their tests, or even once they hooked him up to a few machines," I explained. Placing the stethoscope on one side of his chest and moving to the other side, I smiled when I could hear the steady beat of both his hearts. "Good to know they're both working properly," I said, removing the stethoscope and setting it down on the bed.

"What d'ya mean both?" Jackie asked loudly.

Sighing obnoxiously, I said, "Two hearts, Jackie."

"Oh, don't be stupid," she shot back.

"Jackie Tyler, he has a blue box that's bigger on the inside that travels throughout the entirety of time and space. He just stopped himself from dying by regenerating into a different person. And you're telling me you find it hard to believe that he has two hearts?"

Jackie stayed quiet, and it didn't take her long to leave after that. Ashley was still watching me, though now her glances would switch to The Doctor every now and then.

"You said that he regenerates . . . does that mean it's a natural thing for his entire species or just him?" she asked.

"His entire species has the ability."
"So does it happen automatically or does he have to activate it somehow?" Ashley tilted her head curiously.

"I'm not really sure. I know that he has more control over it than it seems like. Gallifreyans can choose not to regenerate if they don't want to."

"Is it just a different face or a different person?"

"A bit of both, actually. Different face and different personality, but the memories are still the same," I said.

Ashley toyed with a loose thread on the blanket. "So what happened . . . when you left? You said it had only been a few hours for you, but for us it's been months. We just went about our lives, wonderin' what had happened and if you two were alright. I'm still not sure if I've got an answer to that or not."

I tucked some of my hair behind my ear. "When the TARDIS console was ripped open, I looked into the heart of the TARDIS. No one is meant to do that. It gave me power over life and death. I could have ripped the universe in half and reformed it however I wanted it to be. I was basically a god for a short while. After I absorbed the power, I flew the TARDIS back to the Doctor and, long story short, I wiped out the Daleks, saved the day, brought Jack back to life, and offered to bring The Doctor's burning planet back into existence. Then he absorbed all the energy from me, causing his regeneration and our current predicament."

Ashley blinked wide eyed at me. "Um . . . wow, um . . . wow . . ."

"Yep," I replied, popping the p.

"You love him, don't you?" she said quietly. Her tone sounded more like she was stating a fact than asking me a question.

My insides quivered pleasantly at the thought. "Yeah, I do," I admitted, smiling warmly. I watched The Doctor's face and noticed his expression was screwed up ever so slightly. Furrowing my eyebrows, I ran my fingers through his hair and caressed his cheek. The Doctor immediately relaxed and weakly attempted to lean further into my hand. Chuckling, I lightly stroked his face.

"Does he love you back?"

"He cares about me, more than he could ever admit out loud," I said. "But that's not what you want to know, right?" I moved my hand back to The Doctor's hair. "He hasn't told me that he loves me. And before you get all upset, keep it in mind that just because he can't say it, doesn't mean he doesn't feel it. I don't ever expect The Doctor to admit it to me. I'm not sure if I even expect him to admit it to himself."

Ashley frowned. "Dahlia, is that really what you want? I mean, sure, traveling around the universe is exciting, but should you put so much of yourself into a man who won't ever tell you he loves you?"

I laughed. "I know it doesn't make sense to you. Sometimes I can't believe any of this has happened to me. The first few months in this dimension were just me wondering what the fuck had happened and what I should do with myself, but now I'm in a relationship with The Doctor, and I survived Bad Wolf. What're ya gonna do, right?" I frowned. "What I mean is . . . I don’t need for him to tell me. As long as I know, then I’m happy."

Ashley smiled and shook her head. "Whatever. If it works for you, then that's all right. You've
earned some happiness, even if it is with a weird alien who travels in a box." She stood up and motioned for me to do the same. "Come on, you look like you could use a cup of tea."

I rolled my eyes. "You know I don't like tea."

"Yeah, but you need to get out of this room or else you're gonna crawl into bed with him and that would be creepy."

Huffing, I grimaced but accepted her logic; I kissed The Doctor's forehead and petted his hair once more before standing and following Ashley to the kitchen where, thankfully, a pot a fresh coffee was waiting for me instead of a cup of tea. Jackie was there, too; she was nursing a cup of tea and handed another cup to Ashley while I fixed my coffee.

"Jackie, is Harriet Jones prime minister now?" I asked airily. It was a neutral way to extend an olive branch to the elder Tyler woman without the conversation ending in an argument.

"Yes, she is. I'm eighteen quid a week better off thanks to her," Jackie responded. "They're calling it 'Britain's Golden Age'. Keep on saying my Dahlia's met her."

Ashley smiled. "Did more than that. Stopped World War Three with her."

The television in the living room piped up at that time. "Harriet Jones—what about those calling the Guinevere One Space Probe a waste of money?" a reporter asked. We all shuffled into the living room with our respectable beverages to get a better look at the broadcast currently playing.

Harriet Jones replied to the question easily, "Now, that's where you're wrong. I completely disagree if you don't mind. The Guinevere One Space Probe represents this country's limitless ambition. British workmanship sailing up there among the stars."

"This is the spirit of Christmas, birth and rejoicing, and the dawn of a new age, and that is what we're achieving fifteen million miles away. Our very own miracle," the reporter said. The newscast then cut to a computerized picture of the new probe traveling around Earth.

"The unmanned probe Guinevere One is about to make its final descent. Photographs of the Martian Landscape should be received by midnight tonight," the main reporter finished.

Mickey arrived just as I was about to take a shower. Ashley and him were supposed to go on a date/shopping trip but were now being obviously cautious as they talked about their plans around me. They were subtly trying to get me to give them some sort of advice or warning for while they were out.

Rolling my eyes, I finally waved them toward the door. "Be careful while you're out. Enjoy yourselves but head back here at the first sign of trouble. Oh, and try not to panic. Panicking never gets us anywhere."

The couple frowned at me, and Ashley opened her mouth to ask me the predictable question of "Are you sure?" But I waved off her concern and basically shoved them out the door. "Just stick to my advice and you'll be fine," I said, sighing when I could finally close the door.

I made my way to the bathroom where my change of clothes was already waiting. Jackie was
attentively watching some program on TV so I had an opportunity to actually be alone for once.

After locking the door, I eased my hand into my pocket and cautiously pulled out the object that I had been steadily ignoring since I had looked into the heart of the TARDIS.

The fob watch had cooled down from its earlier searing temperature. I hadn't known what had been attempting to burn a hole through my leg until The Doctor had been situated in Ashley's room when I had rubbed the affected area only to find the watch in my way.

Turning the watch over in my hands, I traced the glimmering symbols on the back of the metal. Something about it seemed off, but that was probably just the energy I could feel thrumming just beneath the watch's surface. At first I just scraped my nail along the surface, not really in the mood to deal with what could possibly be another crisis. But then my curiosity got the better of me (I had obviously been spending too much time with The Doctor) and, against my better judgment, I opened the watch. Or . . . attempted to. It seemed to be stuck or, more likely, simply refusing to open.

"Ow!" I hissed, examining my nails. The tips of my fingers stung from my failed attempt at prying the watch open. "Damn thing." I scowled and, after another few moments of examination, decided that the watch wasn't worth the trouble. I could deal with it later, when The Doctor wasn't unconscious, and I wasn't waiting to be attacked by a Christmas tree and a bunch of remote controlled Santas. But first, a hot shower.

I set the watch down on the counter beside the sink and stripped out of my dirty clothes. I hadn't noticed before, but now I could feel all the aches and pains as they settled into what felt like every part of my body. I rolled my shoulders and hissed when something flared painfully; and it wasn't just there. My legs were starting to cramp up something fierce. Turning on the shower, I gently stretched and massaged my muscles while I waited for the water to heat up. As my hands traced over my skin, I felt something resembling static electricity spark at my palms. It seemed like the residual Vortex energy was attempting to take up residence in my body, and I was not having that.

The shower's temperature was finally up to my standards, so I stepped inside, momentarily flinching away from the scalding water until I adjusted to it. When I finally adjusted, I shampooed and conditioned my hair, running my fingers through it from roots to end in a hope to somehow detangle it. My efforts were going well . . . if you didn't count the huge wad of hair that was steadily building in mass on the shower wall.

When I finally finished my shower (which was extended by the disturbing amount of time it took to wash the conditioner out of my hair), I dressed in another pair of jeans and a Star Wars t-shirt. I made sure to remember to put on socks and shoes; I wasn't going to face the Sycorax without any shoes on.

The Doctor was still unconscious when I got back to the room. I knew he would be, but a part of me was still disappointed when I saw that he hadn't moved an inch since I last saw him.

I sat down in my previous spot by the bed and gently squeezed water out of my hair with a towel. Normally I would just let my hair air dry, but at the moment, I needed something to do with my hands while I waited.

As it would happen, I didn't have to wait very long. I heard the front door crash open, and Ashley shout to Jackie, "Get off the phone!"

Tossing the towel aside, I swept The Doctor's hair away from his face and gave him a kiss on the forehead. "I'll be back in a minute. Also, you should probably relax your mental grip on the sonic.
"I dunno! Peak District!" Jackie shouted back in confusion.

Ashley started gathering up different items. "Oh, we'll go to Cousin Mo's then."

"It's Christmas Eve! We're not goin' anywhere! What're you babblin' about?" Jackie barked at her.

Ashley had a reply ready when she caught sight of the Christmas tree in the corner of the room. Dropping the jacket that she had been rifling through, she asked, "Where'd you get that tree?" This tree was obviously different from the original one; it had been white while this one was green. "That's a new tree. Where'd you get it?"

"Well, I thought it was you!"

"How can it be me?" Ashley asked her mother.

Jackie scowled, "Well, you went shopping, there was a ring at the door, and there it was!"

Ashley frowned and shook her head. "No, that wasn't me."

"Then who was it . . . ?"

"All right!" I snapped, stupidly getting too caught up in their conversation to speak up. "Everybody out! Right now!"

Too late. The tree lit up. Then, it started to slowly spin. Then, it sped up, like, really sped up. *Jingle Bells*, of all things, started playing. Jackie decided that was the best moment to start screaming.

"Get out! Stop staring and run!" I shouted as the tree moved forward, reducing the coffee table to mulch in seconds.

Mickey seemed to agree with me, "Go, go, go! Get out!" He held up a chair to try and fend off the tree while Ashley, Jackie, and I vacated the room. They went to the front door while I rushed to the room where The Doctor was.

"Dahlia! What're you doing?!" Jackie cried.

"We have to get to The Doctor! I can use the sonic!" I said, stumbling into The Doctor's room.

"Mickey!" Ashley yelled. "Leave it! Get out! Get out! Mickey! Get out of there!"

I heard the tree destroy the chair and Ashley and Mickey run down the hall towards me. Snatching up Nine's leather jacket, I rifled through the pockets, going so far as to dig so deep that I was nearly up to my shoulder trying to find the sonic. I finally got ahold of the screwdriver, grinning widely as I did so.

"Just leave him!" Jackie shouted.

"Get in here!" Mickey growled. He and Ashley rushed into the room just as I left.

"Dahlia!" Ashley screamed.

Pushing Jackie further down then and closer to The Doctor's room, I shouted back, "Hold on!" I set the sonic to the right setting and aimed it at the spinning tree. Nothing happened. "No!" I snarled.
"No, no, no, no! What're you doing?" I attempted to will it to work but all that got me was a punch in the gut. Or what felt like one. Clutching my abdomen, I doubled over and wheezed. Now, I wouldn't have been too freaked out, after all, this was probably just a problem caused by the residual energy left the heart of the TARDIS . . . but then again, I wasn't too sure why I just exhaled a cloud of gold dust. Of course, that could also be leftovers from the energy. So why was I freaking out? I wasn’t freaking out. I was running down the hall, back to Ashley and Mickey, who were shouting for me to run faster.

As soon as I'm in the room, the door is slammed shut and Mickey and Jackie are shoving a wardrobe in front of it.

"What happened? I thought you said you could use it!" Ashley shrieked.

I rushed over to The Doctor's side, shoving the sonic into his hand. "The residual energy from the TARDIS is blocking me from using it. We need The Doctor." I shook The Doctor and shouted, "Wake up! Doctor! We need you!"

The wardrobe was shaking as the tree began ripping it to pieces. Mickey and Jackie jumped away from it, and Jackie cowered back against the wall and sobbed, "I'm gonna get killed by a Christmas tree!"

I leaned in close to The Doctor's ear and pleaded, "Please, Doctor, I need you."

And hand to swiftly pull back to avoid being smacked in the face with The Doctor's skull when The Doctor jolted upright. He used the sonic on the tree, causing it to explode. Lowering his arm, he said to himself, "Remote control. But who's controlling it?" He looked at me. "Are you all right?" His eyes quickly looked me up and down for any sign of harm.

"Yeah, I'm fine," I answered. No need to worry him about the gold dust. Once the excess energy ran its course, everything would be back to normal.

"Good," The Doctor said, leaping out of bed and into a pair of slippers before heading for the door.

Rolling my eyes, I grabbed my Star Trek hoodie and the men's dressing gown. "Doctor."

"Hm? What?"

I waved the robe in his face. "It's cold outside."

He rolled his eyes but smiled when he took the robe from me and put it on. I put my own jacket on and we all made out way outside. I stood at the balcony by The Doctor's side; Ashley, Mickey, and Jackie all opted to stay a few feet back, but we were all staring at the group of robot Santas in the street.

"That's them," Mickey said. "What are they?"

With a cold expression, The Doctor pointed the sonic at the Santas. The Santas slowly backed away a few steps and huddled close together, teleporting away right after.

Mickey snorted. "They've just gone! What kind of rubbish were they? I mean, no offence, but they're not much cop if a sonic screwdriver's gonna scare them off."

"Pilot Fish," I supplied.

"What?" Ashley asked.
"They were just Pilot Fish," The Doctor said. Suddenly, he was coughing and throwing himself against the wall, sliding down until he was sitting on the floor. I dropped down beside him, wiping the sweaty hair away from his eyes and cradling his face in my hands. The Doctor gasped, "You woke me up too soon."

"I know. I didn't want to, but I had a little trouble with the sonic," I wheezed. A throbbing, nearly painful pressure was making its way through my abdomen and making it hard to breathe, let alone talk.

The Doctor smiled weakly. "I'm still regenerating. I'm bursting with energy." To make his point, a cloud of vortex energy burst from his mouth. "You see? The Pilot Fish could smell it. A million miles away. They eliminate the defense—that's you lot—and they carry me off. They could run their batteries on me for a couple of year—" He cut off, lurching forward, forcing me to release him, and letting out a low groan. "My head!" He managed to get out through gritted teeth. "I'm having a neuron implosion. I need—"

"What do you need?" Jackie frantically asked.

"I need—"

Jackie interrupted him, "Say it, tell me, tell me—"

"I need—"

"Painkillers?"

"I need—"

"Do you need aspirin?"

"I—"


I decided to try my luck at getting through to her, "He needs—" Of course, not only did Jackie interrupt me, but my voice came out in a soft wheeze.

The Doctor must have heard me because he gave me a hard stare while, through his own gasping, he said, "I need—"

"Liquid paraffin. Vitamin C? Vitamin D? Vitamin E?"

"I need—"

By now, Jackie had managed to work herself into hysterics. "Is it food? Something simple? Uh—a bowl of soup? A nice bowl of soup? Soup and a sandwich? Soup and a little ham sandwich?" She shrieked.

The Doctor scowled at her and snapped, "I need you to shut up."

Jackie seemed taken aback by his sudden snappiness. "Oh, he hasn't changed that much, has he?"

Lurching forward again, The Doctor gasped for breath. "We haven't got much time. If there's Pilot Fish, then—" Looking completely baffled, he pulled his hand out of his robe and looked at the apple in his hand. "Why's there an apple in my dressing gown?"
Jackie winced. "Oh, that's Howard, sorry."

The Doctor's eyebrows furrowed. "He keeps apples in his dressing gown?"

Jackie shrugged and offered, "He gets hungry."

The Doctor looked down at the apple in confusion. "What, he gets hungry in his sleep?"

"Sometimes." Jackie nodded.

He looked like he was about to make another comment, but instead he let out an agonized shout. "Brain . . . collapsing—" The Doctor gripped my arms tightly. "P-the Pilot Fish. The Pilot Fish mean . . . that something-something. Something's coming." Chest heaving from the strain of forcing words out, The Doctor managed to get out a few more. "Dahlia . . . stay safe." And then he collapsed, unconscious, into my lap.

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Once again, we carried The Doctor back to bed. I took his robe and hung it up in the hall again, taking a bit of time to even out my breathing. The pain in my abdomen was still there, but it wasn't something that I couldn't handle. I just needed a moment to adjust . . . and by a moment, I meant a whole bottle of pain medication.

Eventually, I composed myself enough so that I could return to The Doctor's side. I didn't get to sit down, though.

"Dahlia, can you come in here?" Ashley called out.

Sighing, I weighed the pros and cons of saying no. In the end though, I was dealing with a Tyler woman, and I would rather keep my eardrums, thank you very much. So I made my way to the living room.

The TV was on, and Ashley, Mickey, and Jackie were watching it. The reporter from earlier was back on and talking. "Scientists in charge of Britain's mission to Mars have re-established contact with the Guinevere One space probe. They're expecting the first transmission from the planet's surface in the next few minutes."

The program switched to a live press conference. The man at the podium spoke up, "Yes, we are. We're-we're back on schedule. We've received the signal from Guinevere One. The Mars landing would seem to be an unqualified success."

Another man asked, "But is it true that you completely lost contact earlier tonight?"

Nodding, the first man replied, "Yes, we had a bit of a scare. Guinevere seemed to fall off the scope, but it-it was just a blip. Only disappeared for a few seconds. She's fine now, absolutely fine. We-we're getting the first pictures transmitted live any minute now. I'd better get back to it, thanks."

The program shifted back to the newscasters, and I turned to Mickey and Ashley.

"You two needed something?"

Mickey nodded and motioned toward his laptop. "Here we go, pilot fish. Scavengers, like the Doctor said. Harmless—they're tiny, but the point is, the little fish swim alongside the big fish."
Ashley frowned and looked at me. "Like sharks, right?"

"Great big sharks. So, what the Doctor means is, we had them . . . now we get that," Mickey said, clicking on a link. An animation of a shark popped up, its jaws snapping viciously.

"How close?" Ashley asked.

Mickey sighed. "There's no way of telling, but the pilot fish don't swim far from their daddy."

"So that basically means really close," Ashley deadpanned.

Jackie wandered back into the room and looked at the television. "Funny sort of rocks."

While Ashley and Mickey immediately looked up at the screen, I didn't. "They aren't rocks," I interjected.

The newscaster continued speaking, "... coming live from the depths of space on Christmas morning." The blurred image finally cleared up, revealing an alien. The alien seemed to glare at us for a moment before bursting into a loud roar.

Jackie immediately grabbed the remote and started flipping through the channels. "The face of an alien life form was transmitted live tonight on BBC1—" "On the 25th of December, the human race has been shown absolute proof that alien life exists." "These remarkable images have been relayed right across the world."

For the most part, the Tyler residence fell into an uneasy pattern. Mickey was tapping away at his laptop with Ashley hovering right over his shoulder. Jackie had made more tea and coffee and was watching the television intently, waiting for more news on the aliens. I was flitting between The Doctor's room and the living room, as per a silent agreement to Ashley. She didn't want me fretting over The Doctor and isolating myself with his unconscious body.

"Dahlia," Mickey said. "Take a look, I've got access to the military. They're tracking a spaceship. It's big, it's fast, and it's coming this way."

Frowning, Ashley asked, "Coming for what, though? The Doctor?"

"The Doctor's only part of what they want," I piped up. "They also want to enslave the human race and use them as free labor."

Ashley and Mickey snapped to face me. "You've seen them before?" Mickey asked.

I shook my head. "Not in person. I've seen the episode, of course, but I've never had the pleasure of experiencing the Sycorax in person."

"Can you understand what they're sayin'?" Ashley asked, motioning toward the laptop screen, where the aliens were speaking in their native language.

Shaking my head again, I said, "Not really. I can get bits and pieces, but it's only small words like of, we, are, humans. Stuff like that. The rest isn't translating."

"Why not?"

"The TARDIS is what translates alien languages into English. She connects your mind to her core
or something like that and translates everything, but since she's connected to The Doctor, and he's comatose, the connection is being blocked," I explained.

An American News Station came on the television. "Despite claims of an alien hoax, it's been reported that NATO forces are on red alert."

Sighing and rubbing my temples, I gathered up the used tea leaves I had asked the others to save instead of throw away and put them in a paper towel. I was hoping that if I put them on The Doctor, it would speed up his recuperation. Yeah, I understood that it was a very desperate and pathetic attempt. Perhaps onlookers could shut up.

When I got to The Doctor's room, Jackie was still there, talking to him. "Oh, come on, sweetheart. What do you need? What is it you need, tell me . . ."

She looked up when I approached the open doorway. Clearing her throat, she stood and left the room, briefly eyeing the bundle in my hand.

Biting my bottom lip, I sat down by the bed and sheepishly held up the tea leaves. "I brought these. I'm not sure if they'll help at all, but I can't just do nothing . . . I thought about getting everyone in the TARDIS already, you know, get a head start on all of this, but then I thought about what would happen if Jackie got stuck in there with us and thought," I took a deep breath through my teeth, "better not."

Predictably, The Doctor didn't say anything back. "Sorry," I muttered, placing the folded towel on his forehead. "You know I do one of two things when I don't know what to do. I either clam up or ramble on about nothing, and I just happen to be doing the latter. And there I go again . . ." Sighing heavily, I stroked his cheek. "I wish this universe hopping thing came with a handbook. How much can I change? What should I change? Can I even change it all? Will it have repercussions in the future? Will it fuck up the timeline? Goddammit, we've been over this, or at least I've been over this, a thousand times before, and I still don't have any fucking answers. And then I'm always afraid that, no matter what I do, I'm either gonna disappoint you or make you angry because I didn't, or couldn't, tell you something that was gonna happen." I stopped running my mouth for a few seconds to catch my breath. "I'm scared, Theta. I've fulfilled my original purpose for being here. I needed to make sure Bad Wolf happened, and it has. What am I supposed to do now? Just coast through the rest of my time here and wait for—for Canary Wharf?" I whispered the last part, like I was admitting a filthy secret.

A part of me wanted The Doctor to be awake for this conversation; a more sensible part knew I had to stop telling him when I had these thoughts. Everyone knew that The Doctor hated when humans didn't meet his expectations.

Yelling and shouting disrupted the calm that had settled over the flat. I jerked out of the daze I had been in since my thought process had died off into uncomfortable silence. Taking a moment to get my bearings and remember what was going on at the moment, I left the room and went outside. Ashley and Mickey were there with a woman I hadn't met before. A man was standing right by the balcony railing with a blank expression; he wasn't moving at all, just standing still and breathing.

"Dahlia! What's going on?" Ashley barked, turning her fierce stare on me.

"It's all right," I said. "Nothing's gonna happen to them, at least for now. They're being controlled by the Sycorax, but it's just an expression of their ability and a warning to make people afraid."
"Controlled?" Mickey snapped. "Mind control? Then why isn't everyone else effected?"

Shaking my head, I corrected him, "No, blood control, not mind control. They're controlling all the A positives."

"So, what? They're all just gonna stand there?" Ashley asked.

I nodded. "Yep. No need to panic."

The unfamiliar woman stared at me. "How do you know? He's standing on a ledge!"

Sighing heavily, I only barely managed to contain most of my annoyance. "Is he suicidal or does he have suicidal tendencies?"

"What? No!"

"Then he's not going to jump. Like I said, the Sycorax are making a point, and it's only for show. Unless the people actually want to jump, they won't. Blood control only goes so far," I said tiredly, walking back into the Tyler flat.

I made my way to the living room and collapsed on the couch. I didn't know why I was so tired. In the episode, Rose hadn't been this exhausted, but then again, that had just been a TV show. Things were most likely very different here in the real world. But still, should I really have these terrible aches in seemingly every bone in my body? My joints felt ready to fall apart the more I used them.

Ashley and Mickey entered the flat. Ashley walked over and stood behind my spot on the couch. She reached for the remote and changed the channel.

"I would ask you all to remain calm. But I have one request: Doctor. If you're out there . . . we need you," Harriet Jones said. "I don't know what to do. But if you can hear me, Doctor . . ." I could feel everyone's eyes when they turned to stare at me. "If anyone knows The Doctor, if anyone can find him . . . the situation has never been more desperate. Help us. Please, Doctor. Help us."

Grunting, I managed to haul myself off the couch. I needed to keep moving or else I would fall asleep. Something occurred to me. What if my body needed to reboot like The Doctor's did? What if it was nicely trying to say it was about to shut down for a few hours? But then those thoughts lead to darker ones. Would I wake up? Was there something wrong with me? Oh God, what if I was breaking down on a molecular level because my body couldn't stand the aftereffects of the time energy?

Okay, halt! Stop that train of thought right now. Your molecules are not breaking apart. You are exhausted because the energy from the TARDIS took a lot out of you, and you haven't had time to rest yet. Now calm the fuck down.

I walked to The Doctor's room. He hadn't moved, of course. At least his chest was steadily rising up and down.

Jackie walked up behind me. "Maybe he isn't coming back."

I huffed. "He will. It's just gonna take some time. Regenerating takes a lot out of him, but he'll be fine when he wakes up."

I was sure Jackie had a retort to that, but she didn't get the chance to say it. Every window in the flat exploded inwards, scattering glass every which way. Jackie screamed. And I suddenly remembered that earlier I had planned to get everyone into the TARDIS before this shit happened.
"Mother of fuck!" I screamed furiously. "No one go outside! You hear me, you stupid fucks?!"
Too late. I heard the door slam open as Ashley and Mickey decided to rush outside to see what was going on. I growled low in my throat and ran outside after them. They were staring up at the sky, where an enormous space ship was hovering. Grabbing Ashley and Mickey by their arms, I hauled them back inside and slammed the door behind us.

"You two are going to help me get The Doctor to the TARDIS," I ordered, pointing at Mickey and Ashley. Then I turned to Jackie. "Get together whatever you need, maybe even some food. I can't remember how stocked the TARDIS is or if she'll restock automatically if The Doctor's out of commission."

"Why the TARDIS?" Mickey asked.

"Because, Mickey, the TARDIS is the safest place on the entire Earth. And I know the fucking future, so everyone has to do what I say unless you have a better idea." No one objected; instead, they scattered to do the jobs I had assigned them. I quickly tried to think of anything that I would need for the following events, but nothing came to mind. My TARDIS key was around my neck and the fob watch was in my pocket. There was no point taking the sonic from The Doctor; in my state I wouldn't be able to use it. I could get my laser screwdriver when we got on the TARDIS, but there wasn't really a point since I only needed to buy enough time with the Sycorax for The Doctor to wake up. And all I was going to end up saying to them was a bunch of gibberish that I would most likely make up on the spot.

I rushed backed toward The Doctor's room. Mickey and Ashley seemed to be doing an alright job of gathering The Doctor up, but that didn't mean I shouldn't help them. Mickey was managing The Doctor's torso surprisingly well, but Ashley was having a bit more difficult time with the gangly legs so I sidled up to her side and grabbed one. Slowly, we made our way out of the flat and down the stairs.

Jackie was busy gathering things up in bags. Ashley, by the looks of her annoyed expression, was not pleased by that at all.

"Mum! Forget about that stuff and give us a hand!"

"It's food!" Jackie cried. "Dahlia said we might need—"

"It's all right, Jackie. We can get it later," I interrupted. We didn't have time for this.

Predictably, Jackie ignored both of us and continued whatever she was doing with the bags.

It was slow going, but we made it to the TARDIS. We didn't even need to pause so I could unlock the door; the TARDIS opened her doors for us on her own.

Once we were inside, Mickey, Ashley, and I laid The Doctor on the floor next to the console. Jackie closed the TARDIS doors behind her when she finally caught up with us.

Mickey frowned. "No chance you could fly this thing?"

I shook my head. "Not at the moment."

"Why not? You flew it before."

I pursed my lips and looked at the console. "The Doctor has been teaching me, but she won't fly right now. Whenever The Doctor regenerates, the TARDIS changes, too. Sometimes it's little changes, like right now, or big ones that make her catch on fire and take hours to complete.
Besides, I'm just a beginner. The Doctor's been flying the TARDIS for nine hundred years and sometimes he can't fly her properly. Would you really want someone who's only been doing it for about a year attempt to fly her on their own?"

"Eh . . . you're properly right," Mickey mumbled. "Better not chance it." He looked around the console room. "So, what do we do? Just sit here?"

I nodded. "For now."

"What does that mean? 'For now' . . ." Mickey grumbled.

Rolling my eyes, I said, "It means there's nothing we can do at the moment to speed up the events that are currently taking place. So we wait. Patiently." I narrowed my eyes at him when I growled the last word.

Jackie pulled out a thermal flask from one of her many bags of items. "Right, here we go. Nice cup of tea."

Ashley leaned against the console and rolled her eyes. "Hmm, the solution to everything . . ." she sighed.

"Now, stop your moaning. I'll get the rest of the food," Jackie said, leaving the TARDIS.

Shit. Shit-shit-shit-shit-shit-shit! I needed to think up some bullshit to feed the Sycorax, and I had absolutely no idea where to begin!

Mickey spoke, interrupting my train of panicked thought. "Tea. Like we're having a picnic while the world comes to an end. Very British."

I shrugged off his contempt. "At least you're not like Americans. Most of them would already be shooting at random people by now. Better to stay calm and drink tea rather than jumping to conclusions and violence."

That got a small smile out of him. He turned his attention to the console and walked closer to it. "How does this thing work? It picks up TV, maybe we could see what's going on out there. Maybe we've surrendered." He pressed a few random buttons that I knew were wrong for the action he wanted. He turned to me and asked, "What do you do to it?"

Sighing, I hauled myself up from the captain's chair and trudged over to him. Lightly maneuvering Mickey out of the way, I pressed in the combination to activate the television with my right hand while my left automatically started the signal that would lead the Sycorax to us.

I shouldn't be able to do that. I shoved that thought to the back of my mind.

The screen clicked on to a news station, the BB1, I think. I motioned for Mickey to reclaim his earlier position. "Press these two to flip through the channels," I instructed, pointing to two buttons that were side-by-side.

"Thanks."

"No problem."

A loud beeping noise started coming from the console. "What's that?" Ashley questioned. "I don't think that's supposed to happen when you turn on the TV."
"Maybe it's a distress signal," Mickey guessed, not taking his eyes off the telly.

"Dahlia?" Ashley asked.

"Don't worry about it. Nothing major," I muttered, lying through, my teeth.

Ashley furrowed her eyebrows in confusion but let the topic drop. She was going to murder me later. Right now though, she was standing and stretching. "I'm gonna go check on Mum. Is that all right?"

"Please don't let her bring the entire flat with her. We probably don't even need what she's already brought. The TARDIS tends to restock on her own."

Ashley laughed. "I'll make sure she doesn't." She opened the door and didn't even take a step out the door before she was screaming.

I snapped my head up just in time to see a Sycorax grab her and wrap a hand around her mouth, cutting off her scream. Mickey was the first to move, but I was right behind him. He attempted to free Ashley, but another Sycorax restrained him immediately. I wasn't any help, either. My body was too weak to really put up any kind of physical fight, but I did spit curses at the aliens and send them all furious looks when one of them jerked my arms behind my back. With my foot, I managed to kick the TARDIS door shut. The satisfying sound of the lock clicking into place eased my anxiety, if only by a tiny bit.

The crowds of aliens in the surrounding stands cheered when we were released and shoved forward to stand with the other humans.

Harriet Jones hugged me. "Dahlia, oh god Dahlia!" She pulled away to look me in the eye. "The Doctor . . . is he with you?"

I shook my head. "He's out of commission. We're on our own."

The Sycorax leader pointed at me and shouted something angrily. I caught a few of the words, but I couldn't understand most of it.

Harriet's companion looked down at his translator and repeated what the Sycorax leader had said, except in English. "The brown girl. She has the clever blue box. Therefore, she speaks for your planet."

"But she can't," Harriet objected, frowning deeply.

I straightened immediately, tilting my head upwards to make it easier to look into the Sycorax leader's eyes. "Harriet, when dealing with alien races, I'm actually the most qualified person here. Being a government official doesn't matter. The Sycorax don't care."

"They'll kill you," Harriet whispered in horror.

Raking my hair out of my eyes, I barked out a laughed and looked at her. "Really? That all you got? You have no idea how many times I've nearly died while adventuring with The Doctor. I've faced people, aliens and human alike, who were much more dangerous than a group of Sycorax." I turned back to the Sycorax. "Let me handle this." Not mentioning that I had no clue what I was supposed to say.

Stepping forward, I decided to start with something simple. "I address the Sycorax as the representative of Earth and its people." Oh, wow, how was my voice doing that booming thing?
That was so cool. Don't get distracted. Good start. Keep going. "You have come to this planet with the ill intent of enslaving its people through violence, and I cannot allow this. This will be the only opportunity I will give you to leave Earth peacefully. Take it or I will be forced to act." Oh shit. I have got some balls, man.

The Sycorax laughed arrogantly and spoke. "You are very, very funny, girl. What power do you have that gives you such courage to stand against me?" The assistant translated.

Sneering, I calmly marched closer to the Sycorax. "For one, I know the design of this ship inside and out, and because I know that, I know that if I were to cut even one of the many red wires running throughout this ship that the entire thing would immediately stop functioning." That made the Sycorax leader angry. I could tell because he was snarling and growling at me. "Secondly," I continued, "I know that you're only a small breakaway faction of the entire Sycorax race and that you're here on your own terms, not your species'."

The alien leader began snarling and hissing, spitting out words that I only caught a fraction of, but I was getting better. I could understand more than I had before. "Lies! I have a direct line to the Sycorax High Chief, and all I have to do to rain fire down upon your pathetic planet is—"

"Oh cut the bullshit!" I snapped. Now I was angry. I didn't know where the knowledge was coming from, but I was going to use it. "Nearly two hundred years ago, The Sycorax signed an agreement with The Shadow Proclamation that forced the Sycorax to either stop declaring war on every planet they came across, or be wiped out of existence;" I hissed. To be honest, newfound knowledge aside, I was really wondering why I hadn't keeled over yet. Must be the adrenaline; it was most likely the only thing keeping me steady and upright.

"You dare to raise your voice to me!" The Sycorax leader snarled back. "For that you all will die! Your planet will burn, and its people will be enslaved to be used as labor for the Sycorax! I personally shall take your head—"

"I have traveled throughout time and space! I have faced Daleks, Gelth, and Autons. The times I've almost died are numerous! Only a few hours ago, I was a god! I am not afraid of you and I never will be," I proclaimed.

"Wait a moment . . ." Ashley said under her breath, hovering close to my side. "That's English. He's speakin' English!"

The Sycorax leader growled at her, "I would never dirty my tongue with your primitive bile!"

"Blah blah, fuck you," I snapped. "We're hearing English, and that's the cue for your plans to go up in smoke."

"I speak only Sycoraxic!"

Ignoring the angry spitting, I turned on my heel to face the TARDIS. The doors swung open to reveal The Doctor, decked out in his borrowed, striped pajamas and dressing gown. He was smiling when he asked cheekily, "Did you miss me?"

I laughed loudly. Behind me, the Sycorax leader roared in fury. I heard him draw his whip and then flick it. Out the corner of my eye, I could see the whip as it curved towards The Doctor. My gut lurched sickly as the thought of the weapon connecting with The Doctor in any form, even if I knew he was prepared for the attack. Of course, The Doctor caught the whip as it wrapped around his forearm, gripping one section and jerking it out of the Sycorax leader's hands.
"You could have someone's eye out with that!" The Doctor chastised, stepping forward.

Another roar from the Sycorax leader. This time he raised his staff and swung it at The Doctor. The Doctor snatched the weapon from the Sycorax before snapping it in two over his knee and tossing the pieces away.

"You just can't get the staff. Now, you, just wait. I'm busy," The Doctor ordered waringly, pointing a finger at the alien leader. The Doctor then straightened from his domineering position to beam at Ashley and Mickey. "Ashley! Mickey! Hello!" He turned to Harriet. "And Harriet Jones MP for Flydale North! Blimey, it's like 'This Is Your Life'!" He strolled quickly over to me. "Tea! That's all I needed, Dahlia! A good cup of tea! Superheated infusion of free radicals and tannin. Just the thing for healing the synapses . . ." Then his features turned serious and he said lowly, in a tone I hadn't heard since we were last alone, "Now . . . first thing's first . . . be honest. How do I look?"

Biting my lip to try and hide my smile, I took my time in looking The Doctor up and down. It was odd, after associating The Doctor with a larger build and leather jacket, to see him so slender and with the legendary hair with a mind of its own. It was difficult to link my Doctor and this one, but at the same time . . . it wasn't. I guess that made sense. It's probably because I know this was him. I didn't need any proof like ordinary people would. But it was still weird.

Using my right hand, I traced across The Doctor's cheekbone and then down to his jaw with the barest tips of my fingers. His grin slowly curled into a content smile, and when I cupped the cheek I had just traced, he leaned into my touch and nuzzled my hand like a contented cat.

"Dahlia . . ." he sighed, leaning towards me.

Smirking, I removed my hand and flicked him in the forehead.

"Ow!" The Doctor pouted. "What was that for?"

"For flirting in the midst of a crisis, Doctor. You know that's a no-no," I reprimanded him, tapping him on the nose with a finger.

He continued to pout, mumbling, "You didn't answer my question, though."

Rolling my eyes, I huffed, "You look great, if a bit thinner."

He froze on the spot. "Do you like thinner?"

I shrugged. "Not normally, but it looks good on you."

The Doctor immediately brightened. "Really? Well then! Onto something more important. Now . . ." his tone turned dark and serious. "Am I . . . ginger?"

"No, and you never will be, and you know it."

He pouted again. "Aww, I wanted to be ginger. I've never been ginger." Then he frowned at me. "And how do you know I'll never—oh, that's rude. That's the sort of man I am now, am I? Rude." The Doctor pondered this for a moment. "Rude and not ginger."

"That's a lot of it, yeah."

"I'm sorry—who is this?" Harriet Jones interrupted.
"I'm The Doctor." "He's The Doctor." The Doctor and I said at the same time.

Frowning, Harriet argued, "But what happened to my Doctor? Or is it a title that's just passed on?"

"I'm him," The Doctor stated clearly, calmly walking towards Harriet. "I'm literally him. Same man, new face—well, new everything."

She looked at him in disbelief. "But you can't be."

The Doctor looked her straight in the eyes. "Harriet Jones. We were trapped in Downing Street, and the one thing that scared you wasn't the aliens . . . wasn't the war . . . it was the thought of your mother being on her own."

"Oh my God," Harriet blurted out, her jaw dropping.

He leaned forward a bit. "Did you win the election?"

Standing up a bit straighter and beaming proudly, Harriet replied, "Landslide majority."

"If I might interrupt!" the Sycorax leader growled.

The Doctor smiled at him, saying, "Yes! Sorry! Hello, big fella!"

"Who exactly are you?"

"Well," The Doctor drawled, stuffing his hands into the pockets of his robe. "That's the question."

"I demand to know who you are!" the Sycorax leader demanded angrily, shouting out the words.

"I don't know!" The Doctor shouted back. Then he relaxed back into the easygoing position he was originally standing in. "See, there's the thing. I'm the Doctor, but beyond that, I—-I just don't know. I literally do not know who I am. It's all untested." He started a lazy stroll, asking, "Am I funny? Am I sarcastic?" He made eye contact with me and winked. "Sexy?" He then continued with his rambling. "Right old misery? Life and soul? Right-handed? Left-handed? A gambler? A fighter? A coward? A traitor? A liar? A nervous wreck? I mean, judging by the evidence, I've certainly got a gob!"

"Oh yes," I mumbled. "That last one is definitely true."

The Doctor then noticed the big red button that was on display for everyone to see. "And how am I gonna react when I see this?" With the enthusiasm of a child, he pointed at the button and said, "A great big threatening button!" He dashed up the stairs, beaming when he came to a stop beside the button. "A Great Big Threatening Button Which Must Not Be Pressed Under Any Circumstances. Am I right? Let me guess, it's some sort of control matrix? Hmm? Hold on, what's feeding it?" He bent down to access a panel that opened up to reveal the machine's insides. "And what've we got here? Blood?" Sticking his finger inside the machine, he swiped something up and then licked his finger. "Yeah, definitely. Blood. Human blood. A Positive. With just a dash of iron."

In distaste, I scrunched up my face when The Doctor swirled his tongue around in his mouth before wagging it outside of his mouth. "You better brush your teeth before you even think about kissing me," I grumbled.

He ignored me, deciding to continue mostly talking to himself. "Ahh. But that means . . . blood control—" A delighted grin split his face. "Blood control! Oh! I haven't seen blood control for years! You're controlling all the A Positives! Which leaves us with a great big stinking problem.
'Cos . . . I really don't know who I am. I don't know when to stop. So if I see a Great Big Threatening Button Which Should Never Ever Be Pressed . . . then I just wanna do this!" And then he slammed his hand down on the Great Big Threatening Button Which Should Never Ever Be Pressed.

"No!" Harriet and Ashley shouted.

"You've killed them!" Harriet's assistant cried out in horror.

The Doctor addressed the Sycorax leader. "What do you think, big fella? Are they dead?"

"We allow them to live," the alien growled.

"Allow?" The Doctor scoffed. "You've no choice! I mean, that's all blood control is. Cheap bit of voodoo. Scares the pants off you, but that's as far as it goes. It's like hypnosis—you can hypnotize someone to walk like a chicken or sing like Elvis, you can't hypnotize them to death. Survival instinct's too strong."

"Blood control was just one form of conquest. I can summon the armada and take this world by force," the Sycorax hissed back.

The Doctor cocked an eyebrow, unimpressed. "Didn't Dahlia just go over that with you? I would hope that you were listening, since she had a lot of really good points. And besides . . . why would you do that? Look at these people." Gesturing to the humans in attendance, The Doctor began a passionate speech, "These human beings. Consider their potential. From the day they arrive on the planet and blinking step into the sun. There is more to see than can ever be seen. More to do than—no, hold on . . ." And he blows it. "Sorry, that's The Lion King. But the point still stands. Leave them alone!"

"Or what?" the Sycorax taunted.

"Or . . ." The Doctor trailed off before snatching a sword from one of the Sycorax guards and dashing down the stairs and back toward the TARDIS. He stood in front of it, saying, "I challenge you." It seemed like all the Sycorax in the room began laughing at once. "Oh, that struck a chord. Am I right that the sanctified rules of combat still apply?"

"You stand as this world's champion?" the Sycorax leader questioned, advancing toward us and unsheathing his own sword.

Shrugging off his robe, the Doctor replied, "Thank you. I've no idea who I am, but you just summed me up." I caught the robe when he tossed it to me. "So—you accept my challenge? Or are you just a cranakpelcasacreesalvak?"

I flinched at the slur. Then I pointedly ignored the fact that I even knew what The Doctor had just said and paid attention to fight that was about to begin.

"For the planet?"

The Doctor nodded in confirmation. "For the planet."

The two opponents stood completely still as they faced each other; each of them stared the other down, attempting to intimidate their opponent into an early surrender. Male posturing at its finest. And then they ran at each other. Which was ridiculous. A smart move for The Doctor would have been to stay in place and wait for his opponent to come to him. But he was The Doctor and recklessness was his nature, no matter what regeneration he is.
The Doctor was thrown to the side, causing the Sycorax leader to burst into ugly laughter. The Doctor quickly righted himself and threw himself back into the fight. Sneering, the Sycorax swung his sword straight at The Doctor's head.

"Look out!" Ashley shrieked, before quickly clapping both of her hands over her mouth to stop anymore sudden sound from escaping.

Huffing and rolling his eyes, The Doctor sarcastically said, "Oh, yeah, that helped. Wouldn't have thought of that otherwise, thanks." And then the fight was continuing. The Doctor lured the Sycorax up a flight of stairs. "Bit of fresh air?" he asked, smashing a button that opened the large doors of the ship. Then the fight continued out onto the platform outside the ship.

Wind gusted inside the room, whipping my hair around my face. I raked it out of my face as I rushed up the stairs after the two battling males.

I got up the stairs just in time to see the Sycorax leader catch The Doctor on the nose with his sword. Gritting my teeth, I clenched my fists to ground myself before I decided to do something stupid, like run out there and continue the battle myself.

"How can you just stand there and watch? I'm not even as close to The Doctor as you are, and I want to take a few swings at that Sycorax myself," Ashley said, wrapping her arms around herself and clutching her elbows.

I clenched my jaw. "Believe me, I wish I could take out some of my aggression on the bastard, but two things make than not possible. One, I'm way too weak to even lift that sword at the moment, and two, if anyone invalidates the challenge, the Sycorax win the planet."

Frowning, The Doctor wiped his nose on the back on his shirt sleeve; then he ran forward to meet the Sycorax leader's sword. The metal rang when the weapons clashed. Again, The Doctor was knocked back onto the ground.

I squeezed my eyes shut and turned my head away. I knew there wouldn't be any blood and that The Doctor would be fine, but I still couldn't watch . . .

Ashley shrieked, and I knew the Sycorax had sliced The Doctor's hand off at the wrist. Opening one eye just a smidge and turning back to the fight, I was met with the sight of The Doctor's annoyed expression.

"You cut my hand off!" he snipped indignantly.

The Sycorax leader cheered victoriously.

The Doctor easily maneuvered back onto his feet. "And now I know what sort of man I am. I'm lucky. 'Cos quite by chance . . . I'm still within the first fifteen hours of my regeneration cycle. Which means I've got just enough residual cellular energy . . . to do this." He held up the new stump on his wrist to show all of us as his hand regrew in a wave of gold dust.

"Witchcraft," the Sycorax growled.

"Time Lord," The Doctor replied calmly.

Turning to a random Sycorax, I grabbed their sword and tossed it to The Doctor. "Catch!"

The Doctor caught the sword expertly and twirled it in his hand.
Please don't do the Texas accent. Please don't do the Texas accent, I pleaded mentally.

"Wanna know the best bit? This new hand . . ." The Doctor said right before shattering my please with a god awful Texas accent. "It's a fightin' hand!"

Oh god why . . .

This time The Doctor was the first to charge his opponent. The Sycorax leader blocked his attack and the fight was on again. They swung at each other for several long minutes, neither of them landing a blow until The Doctor got an opening. He jabbed the Sycorax in the gut with the hilt of his sword. The Sycorax groaned loudly and clutched at the most likely bruised area. The Doctor repeated the action two more times, causing the Sycorax to collapse to his knees.

Coldly, The Doctor pointed his sword at his opponent's throat, saying, "I win."

Wheezing, the Sycorax leader spat out, "Then kill me."

"I'll spare your life if you'll take this champion's command: leave this planet, and never return. What do you say?"

"Yes," the Sycorax growled grudgingly.

Clenching his jaw, The Doctor nudged his sword closer to the Sycorax's throat. "Swear on the blood of your species."

"I swear."

The Doctor's stern expression was replaced with a cheerful smile. "There we are, then! Thanks for that! Cheers, big fella!" Then, with a dramatic flair, he stabbed his sword into the ground.

"Bravo!" Harriet cheered, clapping enthusiastically.

He laughed. "Yeah! Not bad for a man in his jim-jams! Very Arthur Dent. Now, there was a nice man."

Snorting, I carefully made my way over to him. Even stepping softly like I was jolted my bones painfully, and I had to resist hissing my discomfort from between my clenched teeth.

As soon as I was within reaching distance, The Doctor was wrapping his arms around me and sliding me the rest of the way so that I was cradled against his chest. He kissed the top of my head. "Are you all right?" he mumbled into my hair.

"Oh please." I scoffed. "You're the one who just regenerated a severed hand. I should be asking you that."

"Yeah, but I feel fine. A little tired, but otherwise all right. You, on the other hand, look like you could use a long nap and lots of tasty food."

"So you're saying I look like crap."

The Doctor immediately tried to backtrack. "No! No, no-no-no, that is not what I'm saying! Not at all! I'm just saying that what happened on Platform One really took a lot out of you, and you need to rest and recover your strength."

I snickered. "I know, Doctor. You can stop rambling, you aren't in trouble."
He pouted. "That was mean."

"But it's so fun to watch you panic."

That made The Doctor smile and kiss me. It wasn't as frantic or overpowering like I thought our second kiss after his regeneration would be. In fact, the kiss was actually quite tame; it was a closed mouth kiss, for one and all soft and tender. And slow. But that was good. I couldn't really remember the last time The Doctor and I actually took our time when kissing each other. That really was weird, now that I thought about it.

The Doctor broke away with a confused look on his face. "Hold on, what have I got in here?"
Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out an odd looking fruit. "A satsuma." He looked at Ashley and said, "Ah, that friend of your mothers—he does like his snacks doesn't he? But doesn't that just sum up Christmas?" The Doctor entwined his fingers with mine, and our little group made its way back to the doorway that lead back into the ship. The Doctor threw the Satsuma into the air, catching it when it made its way back down. "You go through all those presents and right at the end, tucked away at the bottom, there's always one stupid old satsuma. Who wants a satsuma?"

Behind us, the Sycorax leader roared. Before any of us could turn around, The Doctor was throwing the Satsuma at a button on the hull on the ship.

I managed to glance over my shoulder just in time to watch the Sycorax leader plummet to Earth. I turned around to look at The Doctor's dark, unsmiling face.

"No second chances. I'm that sort of a man," he said lowly.

Our group walked back inside the ship and didn't stop until we were standing in front of the TARDIS.

The Doctor turned and addressed the rest of the Sycorax. "By the ancient rites of combat, I forbid you to scavenge here for the rest of time. And when go you back to the stars and tell others of this planet . . . when you tell them of its riches—its people—its potential. When you talk of the Earth, then make sure that you tell them this: It. Is. Defended." And then we were teleported back to Earth.

Confused, and looking a little out of sorts because of the teleportation, Ashley spun around in circles. "Where are we?"

"We're just off Bloxom Road. We're just round the corner, we did it!" Mickey cheered, physically jumping into the air with joy.

Silently, The Doctor held up his hand to tell them not to celebrate just yet. The loud rumbling of the Sycorax ship's engines could probably be heard for miles around. "Wait a minute . . . wait a minute . . ." The Doctor muttered.

The ship hovered above the buildings for a moment or two, but then it sped off into the distance, becoming just a speck in the sky.

The Doctor beamed.

Mickey shouted in excitement. "Go on, leave! Oh, yeah!"

Laughing, Ashley jumped on Mickey's back. "Yeah! Don't come back!"

"It is defended!" Mickey shouted victoriously.
Harriet and The Doctor grinned at each other. Holding out her arms for a hug, Harriet said, "My Doctor."

The Doctor tilted his head to the side and smiled. "Prime Minister."

They hugged.

"Absolutely the same man," Harriet said when they pulled away from each other. She looked up at the sky. "Are there many more out there?"

"Oh, not just Sycorax. Hundreds of species. Thousands of them. And the human race is drawing attention to itself. Every day you're sending out probes and messages and signals—this planet's so noisy. You're getting noticed . . . more and more," The Doctor replied flatly but not unkindly. He looked at Harriet. "You'd better get used to it."

"Ashley!"

We all turned to look as Jackie Tyler came running toward us, her arms flung out in preparation for grabbing Ashley up into bone crushing hug.

"Mum!" Ashley shouted back, carefully climbing off of Mickey's back and running towards her mother.

Rolling his eyes, The Doctor snorted, "Oh! Talking of trouble . . . ."

Both grinning and laughing, Jackie and Ashley hugged. "Oh, my God! You did it, Ashley! Oh!"

Ashley laughed. "You did it too! It was the tea! Fixed his head!"

The Doctor smiled at them. "That was all I needed—cup o' tea."

"I said so!" Jackie retorted proudly.

Ashley motioned to The Doctor with her hand, grinning the entire time. "Look at him!"

Jackie pursed her lips. "Is it him, though? Is it really the Doctor?" Turning to get a better look at him, Jackie finally noticed Harriet. "Oh, my God! It's the bleeding Prime Minister!"

The Doctor opened his arms. "Come here, you!"

Jackie rushed forward to hug him. I quickly moved out of the way to dodge Mickey and Ashley as they swiftly moved in to join the now-group hug. Tuning out the group's light chit-chat, I turned my attention to Harriet and her assistant. Harriet was talking to someone on a cell phone, and our eyes met for several long seconds. As deliberately as I could, I shook my head 'no'. Her expression hardened, and her tone became more clipped. She held eye contact with me even after she snapped her cell phone shut.

"Dahlia?" The Doctor called out curiously.

I flinched. This was going to be bad.

"Dahlia? Are you all right? Do you need something? Do you want—" The Doctor was cut off by a beam of green light shooting up from the ground a few blocks over. Four more beams joined it, meeting in the middle to create a larger beam of light. The green energy then shot upwards in the direction the Sycorax ship had left in. The ship, which had barely been visible at this point,
exploded as soon as the beam of energy came into contact with it.

Ashley gasped in horror. "What is that? What's happening?"

The Doctor stared at me with wide eyes, but I wasn't looking at him anymore. He followed my gaze back to Harriet, and I could feel the air grow thicker as The Doctor was replaced by The Oncoming Storm. He brushed past me as he stalked toward Harriet. "That was murder," The Doctor growled darkly.

"That was defense," Harriet said simply. "It's adapted from alien technology. A ship that fell to Earth ten years ago."

"But they were leaving," The Doctor snapped.

Harriet held her chin high when she replied. "You said yourself, Doctor. They'd go back to the stars and tell others about the Earth. I'm sorry, Doctor, but you're not here all the time. You come and go. It happened today—Mr. Llewellyn and the Major. They were murdered. They died right in front of me while you were sleeping. In which case—we have to defend ourselves."

"Britain's Golden Age," The Doctor sneered.

Should I say something? To Harriet? To The Doctor? What would I say? Any possible choices have just completely disappeared from my mind. I had no clue what I was supposed to do now. I could already feel my body start to tremble out of fear of what The Doctor would say to me.

"It comes with a price," Harriet stated.

The Doctor's lip curled nastily. "I gave them the wrong warning. I should've told them to run—as fast as they can, run and hide because the monsters are coming: the human race."

"Those are the people I represent. I did it on their behalf."

"Then I should've stopped you," The Doctor spat back.

Harriet glared at him. "What does that make you, Doctor? Another alien threat?"

The Doctor broadened his shoulders and threateningly stepped towards Harriet. "Don't challenge me, Harriet Jones. 'Cos I'm a completely new man. I could bring down your government with a single word," he warned.

"You're the most remarkable man I've ever met," Harriet said, her tone giving way to her awe, but she quickly sobered. "But I don't think you're quite capable of that."

He nodded in agreement with her statement. "No, you're right. Not a single word." He stared her down for a long few seconds before simply stating, "Just six."

"I don't think so."

"Six words," The Doctor repeated tauntingly.

"Stop it!" Harriet barked.

"Six," The Doctor said.

Again, the two of them stared at each other. The Doctor broke eye contact and slowly walked over to Harriet's assistant. He removed the man's earpiece and leaned in close to whisper something in
his ear; The Doctor was so quiet no one could make out what he was saying.

But I knew what those six words were. My spine shuddered at the memory of the dark, unforgiving tone of The Oncoming Storm. My body felt like every nerve was awake and alert to whatever The Doctor would do next.

Then, The Doctor leaned away from the assistant and walked back to me, grabbing my hand and tugging me along down the street. Ashley, Mickey, and Jackie followed behind us, all of them looking equal parts frightened, curious, and confused.

Harriet shouted after us, "Doctor! Doctor, what did you—what was—what did he say? What did you say, Doctor? Doctor!"

The only reaction The Doctor gave was to squeeze my hand tightly.

As soon as the TARDIS was in sight, I could feel my legs giving out. They had become more unsteady the longer I put my weight on them. The aches and pains had become less insistent but throbbed irritatingly.

I tried to grab onto The Doctor's robe, but my hand wouldn't cooperate enough to get a grip on the fabric. Luckily for me, The Doctor's reflexes were much better than my impaired ones.

His arm wrapped around my waist and hauled me close to his side. "Dahlia?!" His free hand cupped my face.

"I might have miscalculated how much the TARDIS energy took out of me," I slurred weakly. I kept blinking way too much, but the world was melting together and tilting in weird ways and making me sick.

"Dahlia! What's wrong with her, Doctor?" Was that Ashley? Or . . . Jackie? I couldn't really tell. They sounded so alike when they shouted.

The Doctor gently maneuvered my limp body so he was carrying me bridal-style. "Vortex energy is extremely dangerous and unpredictable. It made me regenerate. It could do any number of things to her human body. I need to get her to the TARDIS."

I could feel The Doctor running; I was bouncing up and down in his grip, even though he tried to step as carefully as he could.

"Hold on, Dahlia, almost to the TARDIS. I'll fix ya up, don't you worry," he muttered to me.

That was the last thing I heard because I blacked out right afterwards.

I woke up in the TARDIS medical bay.

It hadn't really changed since the last time I had been there. The room looked larger and had more coral decorating than before. The bed was more comfortable, too. I also had an IV drip in my arm that lead to a half full bag of clear, hanging fluid. That hadn't been there last time. I was also alone.

I tried to sit up but ended up tugging the IV and needle around uncomfortably. Huffing, I flopped
back down and stared up at the ceiling.

"Doctor?" I called out.

There was a crash down the hall that sounded like someone tripping and falling before getting up and stumbling down the hall toward the med-bay at a rushed pace. The door slid open to reveal The Doctor; his hair was a mess, and he had changed into the brown suit, but it was rumpled and unbuttoned, and his tie was only partially tied.

I snickered. "What happened?"

He pouted and attempted to right his appearance. "I tripped over a shrubbery."

Cue me cackling until I was red in the face, tears were leaking down my cheeks, and my gut felt ready to burst.

He scowled. "Did you have something to do what that?"

"Me?" I asked breathlessly, pulling the most innocent face I could in my current situation. "I would never."

"I'm sure you wouldn't," The Doctor said, coming over to sit by the bed I was laying in. "How're you feeling?"

"Much better. What's in the drip?"

He smiled and answered, "Concentrated tannins, minerals, and vitamins. The Vortex energy depleted most of yours, and this is giving it back to you."

"How long was I out?"

"About twenty minutes. If it were human medicine, it would've been longer, but you know, Time Lord medicine is always better."

I rolled my eyes. "So how long until I can take it out?"

"Well," he drawled. "I guess you could do it now, but I'd prefer to give a bit more time, ya know? Just in case."

I scoffed. "Just in case, meaning you're paranoid and want me to lay here for another twenty minutes."

"When ya say it like that it makes me seem overbearing," he whined.

"Oh, I know it's just because you care, but still. I'm feeling much better now, and would like to take it out now. Ashley, Jackie, and Mickey are probably worried sick."

The Doctor winced when I mentioned them. "Yeah, they really didn't like it when I locked them out of the TARDIS. Jackie tried to break the door down. I was afraid she was gonna do it when she first started. At least Ashley distracted her so she couldn't wring my neck like her promised."

"You locked them out? Why'd you do that?" I asked, straightening out my arm so that he could have an easier time removing the needle.

"You know how Jackie is!" The Doctor said, carefully sliding the nearly invisible needle out of my skin before taping a ball of gauze to the injection point. "She would've been hovering and talking
and nagging and hovering and asking every type of question under the sun and following me around, and she probably would've messed with the console or broken something when I wasn't looking or—"

"Doctor," I interrupted, "you're rambling, but I get your point. No Jackie Tylers in the TARDIS."

He beamed at me and helped me sit up and stand, rubbing my back with one hand and holding my left hand with his free one.

While we were walking down the hall, I decided it was the best time to broach the touchy subject I knew I would need to address sooner rather than later. "Doctor, about the Sycorax . . ."

"Dahlia," he coolly stated, pausing midstride to look at me. Hugging me tightly, he murmured, "I don't blame you for what happened out there. It wasn't your fault. It isn't your job to right every mistake made, and it certainly isn't my place to demand answers from you or blame you for actions that aren't your own." He pulled back and kissed my forehead. "Believe me when I say that you did nothing wrong and that you aren't at fault."

I smiled and placed a small kiss on his mouth. "Thank you."

"Good," he said, leaning down to give me a more thorough kiss, openmouthed this time, and with tongue. After he pulled away, I didn't want to leave the TARDIS to face Jackie Tyler's wrath; I wanted to stay cooped up with him so I could explore his new body. It was only fair. What if this body reacted differently to where I touched than Nine's did? I needed to relearn everything and that would of course take a lot of time.

"Come on," he breathed hotly against my mouth. "Time to face the beast."

Jackie Tyler was most definitely a beast when we knocked on the door to their flat. She immediately scowled at The Doctor and wrapped me in a tight hug. She had wanted (and tried) to slam the door in The Doctor's face, but Ashley had swooped in at the last moment to stop her, saying that it would be rude to lock him out on Christmas, especially when he had just saved Earth and me. Reluctantly, Jackie allowed him into the flat, saying that he would have to figure out what was wrong with her washer if he wanted to stay.

The Doctor, not one to refuse any sort of challenge, fixed the washer in about five minutes. It only took that long because he and Jackie were arguing over the best way to fix it. Both were each trying to shout over the other but neither of them made any sense; Jackie because she kept rewording what was wrong with the washer and The Doctor because he kept making alien references to the washer's machinery just to make Jackie angry.

"Ah, Christmas, such a peaceful holiday," Ashley sighed, rolling her eyes over a cup of tea. Smirking, I downed the last of my hot chocolate. "Well it is peace on Earth and good will to all."

Mickey choked on his tea.

Eventually, the washer was fixed, and we were all sitting around the dining room table eating and cracking open Christmas crackers. The Doctor and I each snapped open a cracker, but he got a blue crown, and I wanted it instead of green. So, I snatched the blue one off his head and replaced it with mine, cackling when he tried to grab the blue crown back but failing.
"Oi! Give that back! Little thief," he growled playfully, attempting to reach around to where I was hiding behind Ashley, but failing again because Ashley was the best friend ever and helping to keep me and my prize out of his reach.

"Nope," I said, popping the p. "You let your guard down so now it's mine."

"You little—"

"Look, it's Harriet Jones!" Mickey spoke up, interrupting our childish argument.

Everyone in the room turned their attention to the television. The Doctor pulled away from Ashley and me and pulled a pair of glasses out of his pocket.

The announcer spoke first: "Prime Minister, is it true you are no longer fit to be in position?"

"No," Harriet huffed, frowning deeply. "Now, can we talk about other things?"

"Is it true you're unfit for office?"

"Look," Harriet stated firmly, "There is nothing wrong with my health! I don't know where these stories are coming from! And a vote of no confidence... is completely unjustified!"

The phone rang; Jackie hurried out of the room to answer it. No one else moved.

"Are you going to resign?" the announcer asked.

Harriet was obviously becoming more and more frustrated, because this time her hands moved with her as she talked. "On today of all days, I'm fine. Look at me, I'm fine. I look fine, I feel fine."

Jackie came back into the room, frowning. "It's Beth. She says go and look outside."

"Why?" Ashley asked.

Shrugging, Jackie said, "I dunno, just go outside and look. Come on, shift!"

We all made our way outside. Meteors were racing across the sky and "snow" was falling to the ground. I didn't want to step out into the ash, but The Doctor nudged me forward, giving me a reassuring smile as we walked. Mickey and Ashley were happily dancing around in the "snow".

"The forecast didn't say anything about snow," Ashley said.

"It's not snow. It's ash. And those aren't meteors. They're the spaceship breaking up in the atmosphere," The Doctor clarified, looking around and up at the sky. "This is a brand new planet Earth. No denying the existence of aliens now—everyone saw it. Everything's new."

I nudged his arm with my shoulder. "So what's next for us? What planet are we gonna stumble through next?"

The Doctor blinked at me in confusion. "Us?"

I fumbled. "Unless... unless you don't—"

"Oh no!" He cut me off as quickly as he could. "No-no-no-no-no. Nononononono! That's not what I meant at all! I just, since I regenerated... I thought you might..."

I snorted rudely. "You stupid idiot. You think a regeneration is gonna get rid of me? Please. Do
you know me at all?"

A slow smile split his face as he stared at me with this stupid, dazed look. "Yeah, I do. And I love it."

Blushing, I looked away and muttered, "Stupid face."

He leaned in close and nipped at my ear, causing my breath to catch. "You like it."

I couldn't be happier when Ashley interrupted us, because if she hadn't, I would've totally jumped The Doctor's bones and wouldn't have cared who watch.

"You guys are leaving already?" she asked.

"Maybe not immediately, but . . . yeah," I answered when I could finally breath again.

Jackie huffed and crossed her arms. "Well, I reckon you're mad. The pair of you. It's like you go looking for trouble."

The Doctor darted toward her and wrapped an arm around her shoulders. "Trouble's just the bits in-between." He motioned up towards the sky. "It's all waiting out there, Jackie. It's brand new to me. All those planets . . . creatures and horizons . . . I haven't seen them yet! Not with these eyes . . ."

Releasing Jackie, he walked back over to me. "And it is gonna be . . . fantastic."

I smiled and laughed softly. It was weird hearing that from his mouth.

The Doctor held out his hand for me and wiggled his fingers. And his eyebrows.

Snorting and trying to contain my smile, I shook my head. "No way, not when you're doing that with your eyebrows."

He stopped wiggling his eyebrows but continued wiggling his fingers persistently.

Rolling my eyes, I relented and took his hand. "So, where to first?" I asked as we walked away from Jackie, Mickey, and Ashley and toward the TARDIS. We waved goodbye to them as they waved and shouted goodbye back at us.

The Doctor waited until the three of them were back inside the flat before answering. "Um . . . that way," he said, pointing at one point in the night sky. "No, hold on . . ." he muttered before moving his hand slightly to the right. "That way."

"That way?" I asked, raising an eyebrow.

"What d'ya think?"

I thought about agreeing, but then I changed my mind. I moved his arm upwards a few inches. "How about that way?"

This time he raised his eyebrow. "That way?" he asked slyly, looking at my instead of the sky. "You sure?"

"Will anything that way attempt to maim, threaten, sacrifice, or murder us?"

"Seventy/thirty chance."

"Then that way's good."
He grinned. "I think perfect's a better word."
The TARDIS was as welcoming as ever. I could feel her humming and radiating her joy for having not just The Doctor back but me as well. But she was also worried. About me. I could feel that, too. The Doctor didn't seem to be able to, though; he pranced up the ramp and to the console like he hadn't just died, come back to life, had his hand chopped off, and then regrew said hand, all in the span of a day.

"So, where're we off to? Got a specific place in mind?" The Doctor asked suddenly, whirling around on his heel to face me.

Smiling, I shook my head. "No, nothing specific. Anywhere's fine with me, as long as we're not running for our lives for once. I'd like to relax for just a bit before going back to saving the day. If that's all right with you."

He shrugged. "A bit boring, but fine with me. In fact—" he spun around and started fiddling with the console. "I think I have the perfect place in mind!"

We ended up on the planet Ravlon Res'verra, and as soon as I set foot outside, I knew why we had come here. Warmth bloomed in my chest at the thought. An alien sun beamed down on my skin, and I turned my face up to meet it. I opened my eyes again to take in the planet's beauty.

"Do you know where we are?" The Doctor asked.

I looked over my shoulder at him. He was leaning back against the TARDIS with a small, content smile on his face.

"The Gardens of Reverent Monks, right?"

"Mmhm," he hummed, pushing off the TARDIS and walking out to join me. "Do you know who I brought with me the last time I visited here?"

Nodding, I said, "I believe so, yeah."

He tilted his head. "And you know why I brought her?"

"Yes," I answered quietly.

Smiling, The Doctor held out his hand for me; I took it without preamble, smiling back at him. Everything was perfect in those moments. I couldn't remember the last time a moment between us had been so serene.

So, I took a page from The Doctor's book and ruined the moment.

Rushing forward, I dragged The Doctor along by the hand, laughing at the shocked, strangled noise he made at the sudden movement.

"Come on, Doctor!" I said. "I want to actually explore the planet, not stand around all day!"

Looking back, I watched him stumble for a second before getting his balance back. The Doctor started laughing, a grin splitting his face.

"I thought I was supposed to be the one making you run! Not the other way around," The Doctor gasped. He was right beside me now, his longer legs making it easy for him to keep up.
Gasping out a laugh that stole my breath, I replied, "Can't let you have all the fun, can I?"

And that's how we spent our day, running across a planet of alien flowers and staring at the purple sky. Oh, and inhaling the vapors given off by the Pikaramenium. Yeah, I didn't know it existed either. I also didn't know that it's a hallucinogenic aphrodisiac. The Doctor knew. He also failed to mention either of them. And because he failed to mention either of them, we were fined and suspended from The Gardens of Reverent Monks for three Hesmer months.

Why did this happen, you ask? Three guesses.

So, there I was, nearly drowning in The Doctor's brown jacket to cover my naked body, waiting while The Doctor, clothed only in some very colorful boxer shorts, attempted to talk the Reverent Monk who caught us out of the fine and suspension.

It wasn't working. In fact, The Doctor's never-ending prattling seemed to be making the Reverent Monk not so reverent.

I couldn't see anything beneath the monk's hood except darkness and the sleeves of the reddish-brown robes the monks wore completely covered the monk's arms and hands. I had almost mistaken the monk for one of the Headless Monks, but once the Pikaramenium's fumes had vacated my system, I quickly realized my mistake.

Rolling my eyes, I lightly shoved The Doctor out of the way. "Quit arguing with the monk, Doctor. If you had told me about the vapors in the first place, we wouldn't be in this mess," I scolded him before turning to the monk. "I apologize for our actions and his rambling. Now, where do we pay the fine?"

The monk slowly turned toward me. I could feel invisible eyes roam over me, not in a sexual way, but like they could see underneath my skin to all my muscle and organ systems. Really creeped me, dude. But I wasn't intimidated. I let the eyes stare and met the blackness where I assumed they were.

Eventually, the monk seemed satisfied with what Xi had found and raised one robed arm to point off to the distant East.

"Walk until you come to our temple and then continue through the Square. You will know the building when you come upon it." The monk's sounded like howling wind and the slide of serpent scales.

I waited for a feeling of foreboding to come to me, but it never did. The monks were not dangerous, no matter how odd they were.

Nodding my thanks, I picked up my clothes and started walking. The Doctor let out an indignant squawk and rushed to redress and follow me.

"Dahlia! Dahlia, wait! Dahlia, please look at me! Dahlia? Please don't be mad! Dahlia!" The Doctor called after me.

I continued walking.

"I can't believe you!"
"Dahlia, I'm sorry!"

"If you wanted to have sex, you could've just said so! Instead of, you know, telling me to inhale the vapors of an alien plant so we can fuck in a field of flowers."

"I thought it would be . . . you know . . . romantic . . ."

"Romantic . . ."

"I've realized my mistake, though! I now know that I—"

"Stop talking." I sighed heavily and pinched the bridge of my nose. "You are such an idiot."

"I know . . . forgive me?"

". . . Yes . . ."

A week later, The Doctor and I were stationed at different sides of the TARDIS, programming her with a new destination.

"So, where are we off to now?"

The Doctor grinned at me over the console. "Further than we've ever been before." To be even more dramatic, he made a show of pulling down the last lever needed to stop the TARDIS' flight.

Jolting to a stop didn’t interference with my balance; I had adjusted to the randomness of the TARDIS' flight patterns a long time ago.

The Doctor bounded to the doors, grabbing his jacket along the way. He waited for me there, practically vibrating with excitement, and threw open the doors to reveal a field of bright green grass and a city buzzing with activity.

"It's the year five billion and twenty-three . . . we're in the galaxy M87, and this . . . this is New Earth,“ The Doctor announced, throwing his arms out widely and nearly hitting me in the face.

Dodging the arm, I raised my eyebrows at him and gave him a bored look.

He pouted. "But you knew that already, didn't you."


"We'll have to visit there sometime, then. I've been there loads of times and there's always something that surprises me."

Thinking back to all the trouble that happens in New York, I coughed awkwardly. "Eh, maybe we'll skip that one for a while. There are more interesting things in the universe than Earth cities." I inhaled again. "What's up with the apple grass, though? I mean, I don't have a problem with it, but seriously?"

The Doctor shrugged. "I'm not really sure either." I laughed at his nonchalant response, causing him to grin. "Come on!" he said, grabbing my hand and running forward through the field.
I stumbled after him until I slipped, tumbling down a hill. And since I didn't let go of The Doctor's hand, he came with me. When we finally rolled to a stop, we were both nearly breathless from laughing.

Wiping a blade of grass from my cheek, I sighed. "So, tell me about this place."

Propping himself up on his elbow, The Doctor smirked as he looke down at me. "I thought you knew everything already."

"Oh please," I scoffed. "Just because I know the main parts doesn't mean I remember every single detail. And besides, I like listening to you talk."

Giggling, he kissed my nose. "Well," he drawled, "the year five billion—the sun expands, the Earth gets roasted."

"First date," I said.

"First kiss," The Doctor countered with a smile.

"That's right!" I said. "You told me you were cashing in a bribe!"

"Well, kind of," he said. "Mostly, though, I was using it as an excuse to kiss you."

"Really?" Furrowing my eyebrows, I stared up at him. "You wanted to then?"

"Of course! I wanted to kiss you practically since you first stepped on the TARDIS!"

"Huh . . . ya learn something new every day," I muttered.

The Doctor smiled and reached down to flick a few stray pieces of apple grass from my cheek and temple.

"Speaking of that day, I've been wondering, when we did the mind meld thing, what did you see inside my head?" I asked.

"A maze of never ending corridors and rooms. There were dead ends and doors that opened to nothing or another wall. Staircases were everywhere, too. Those were odd, too. Some went nowhere. Others were upside-down or lead to a wall."

Frowning, I asked tentatively, "Is that normal?"

"Weeell . . . no," The Doctor replied. "Relatively few species actively create their mindspace to be confusing and evasive."

"Should I be worried about that?"

"Oh no! Not at all! I believe your mindscape shifted subconsciously. In fact, it's rather common with people who have a lot of secrets or sensitive information they need to protect. It's simply a defensive mechanism designed by your subconscious. Though I will admit, it's been a while since I've seen one as complicated and intricately designed as yours." He pursed his lips and stared out at New New York.

I inhaled deeply. "So, it's not a bad thing."

The Doctor's mouth opened, but nothing came out. His eyes were zoned out and faraway. After several moments, he lightly shook his head and seemed to come back down to "Earth". "Hm? No,
no, definitely not. It's actually an advantage, especially for you."

"Huh . . . okay."

"Okay?"

"Yeah, you said it yourself. There's nothing wrong. My head's just a bit more complicated that the average person. I'm cool with that."

We laid there in the apple grass for a while longer, staring up at the unfamiliar sky. The Doctor pointed out the different planets and moons we could see at this time of day, explaining their inhabitants, civilizations, and everything else in-between.

The Doctor cut himself off midsentence and squinted up toward the sun. "Ah, we should probably get going. The scenery isn't the only reason we came here."

"Oh yeah, I remember. Someone from the hospital sent you a message on the psychic paper."

"Yep," he said, popping the 'p'. He sat up and made to stand, offering me his hand to help me up. "But afterwards, we can travel around the city, behave like proper tourists. That sound good with you?"

Taking his hand, I allowed him to pull me to my feet. "Sounds good to me."

Brushing the grass from our clothing, we started toward the city.

We entered the hospital quickly, though The Doctor was more reluctant than at ease.

I snorted. "It's kinda funny that your name is The Doctor, yet you get weirded out by hospitals."

"I can't help it!" he cried out indignantly. "They give me the creeps!"

"I have to agree with you on that one." I looked at him out of the corner of my eye. "It's still funny, though."

A voice filtered through the PA system. "The Pleasure Gardens will now take visitors carrying green or blue identification cards for the next fifteen minutes. Visitors are reminded that cuttings from the gardens are not permitted."

The Doctor looked around with a pout. "No shop. I like the little shop!"

Now I had to make my decision. Keep up with The Doctor and not let Cassandra take over my body while making everything up as I go along or let everything go exactly how it did on the show. I asked Koschei his opinion, but he didn't answer.

That worried me.

My first thought on why Koschei had been so silent was that the Bad Wolf debacle had taken a lot out of him, and he was just recovering, but now I was thinking differently. I hadn't been able to feel his presence since Bad Wolf, and even before that it had been weak. The fob watch itself had stopped humming, the energy inside it seemingly gone, but where had the energy gone?

This was something The Doctor could help with, but I wasn't sure I should tell him. What would
change if I did? What would stay the same? And even more importantly, was it worth the risk?

The Doctor was talking about something. Probably rambling about where he would put the little shop.

"See you in Ward 26, Dahlia!" he called from the elevator.

I snapped my head around just in time to watch the elevator doors close while The Doctor grinned and waved cheerily.

Huffing irritably, I made my way to the other elevator. "Ward 26," I spoke clearly, removing my hair from its ponytail and tensed in anticipation of the oncoming disinfectant shower.

The speaker clicked on. "Commence stage one—disinfection."

Green lights began flashing and a shower of disinfectant rained down from above me. I closed my eyes and decided to endure it in silence. The Doctor, I knew, was enjoying his impromptu shower. I was not.

When the modified rain ceased, I stood rigidly as I waited for the powder stage of the disinfection. Of course, the computer would choose the exact moment I chose to breathe as the perfect time to puff out enough powder to cover me head to toe. Afterwards, I breathed very slowly through my nose to not inhale any powder. There was no telling what any amount of it could do to me if ingested in any way.

The large blow dryer was a much more pleasant experience. Perfectly warm air blew through several vents to dry me as quickly and comfortably as possible. Unfortunately, they didn't stay on for long, just long enough to dry me thoroughly, and then they were gone.

Sighing, I took a moment to put my hair back in a ponytail as the doors opened to reveal a basement that was definitely not Ward 26.

A voice carried through the corridor and into the elevator. "The Human child is clean."

"Welp, time to face the skinflap and her walking doodle." I stepped out of the elevator and listened.

"This way, Dahlia Tombew."

I rolled my eyes. They thought they were so clever.

The small room I entered had very little in it. They only item of importance was a screen which was playing a scene from a fancy party, following around a beautiful blonde woman who I knew to be Cassandra before she chopped off everything that fairly resembled her humanity.

"Peekaboo!"

I twirled around on my heel to face Cassandra and her clone slave, Chip.


"Dahlia Tombew, isn't it a surprise to see you all the way out here," Cassandra said.

I crossed my arms over my chest. "How 'bout we skip the false pleasantries, huh? We both know you're not here for anything good, especially since the last time I saw you, you were just a bunch of pieces."
She scowled at me and commanded Chip, "Moisturize me, moisturize me . . ."

Chip did as he was told, picking up a canister near his feet and spraying her with its contents.

Cassandra's eyes narrowed as she scowled at me. "The last time we saw each other, you murdered me."

I shrugged, waving off her furious tone. "You brought it on yourself, you know, with the whole murder and attempted murder of several people. It's not my fault you're a sack of shit, and karma bit you in the ass."

"The brain of my mistress survived," Chip piped up. "And her pretty blue eyes were salvaged from the bin."

"But you literally ripped apart, basically exploded," I snapped.

Cassandra tisked. "That piece of skin was taken from the front of my body. This piece is the back."

I decided to withhold my off-color comments.

"The mistress was lucky to survive. Chip secreted m'lady into the hospital," Chip said, nodding to only himself. "Chip steals medicine. Helps m'lady. Soothes her. Strokes her . . ." He raised his hand to gently stroke flesh.

"But I'm so alone, hidden down here . . . the last Human in existence . . ." Cassandra continued woefully.

"You're not the last human, you never were. This planet is filled with humans."

"A vegetable patch. Mutant stock!" Cassandra spat venomously.

I gave her a dull look. "They have evolved while you've stayed still. It's nature, Cassandra."

Cassandra seemingly ignored me, turning her attention to the screen instead. "Oh, I remember that night. Drinks for the Ambassador of Thrace. That was the last time anyone told me I was beautiful. After that it all became . . . such hard work."

"It seems you can add 'being really fucking hard to get rid of' to your résumé."

She scoffed. "But I've not been idle, Dahlia . . . tucked away, underneath this hospital—I've been listening. The Sisters are hiding something."

"I already know," I said. "And I'll handle it as soon as I get back to The Doctor."

"Oh," Cassandra cooed. "But you won't be going anywhere. At least not until you've been tweaked a bit." She looked at Chip and growled, "Chip! Activate the psychograft!"

Chip was quick to obey his mistress and I was soon in the grips of the machine, trapped by glowing bars of light.

"Cassandra, I'll give you one warning. Do this, and I'll make sure you regret it," I threatened.

Cassandra ignored me. "The lady's moving on. It's goodbye trampoline, and hello Darling!"

The machine began humming, and right afterwards, a glowing cloud of light shot out of Cassandra's "body" and over to mine. I felt the exact moment when Cassandra entered my body.
and began taking over.

It wasn't pleasant.

And I didn't go down without a fight.

I managed to stop her from blocking me off completely. Instead of being crushed into one corner of my mind, I was taking up almost half of it but that left me locked in my mindscape behind a mental wall Cassandra and her machine had obviously put in place.

From this place in my mind, I could still feel my body move and even see, hear, and feel everything going on around me; I just didn't have any say in what my body did.

Just like now. My mouth moved, spitting out the words "Moisturize me" and I couldn't stop it, no matter how hard I tried. The wall Cassandra had put in place held firmly.

Cassandra continued speaking in my breathless voice. "How bizarre . . . arms . . . fingers . . . hair! Let me see! Let me see!" She dashed over to a dusty mirror to examine my reflection with a horror-filled expression. "Oh my God! I'm a chav!"

"What the fuck?! Do you even know what a fucking chav is you godforsaken skinflap?! I'm not even from Britain, you asshat!" I screamed, slamming as forcefully as I could into the mental wall.

No good came from the action, though. Cassandra either couldn't hear me or had decided to ignore me. She stared at my reflection in the mirror, turning this way and that, examining my body at every possible angle.

"Look at me!" She cried out excitedly. "From class to brass! Although . . ." Shrugging off my cardigan and tossing it somewhere out of sight, Cassandra critically examined my red Henley. She scowled irritably when pulling it down didn't show as much cleavage as she wanted. The scowl didn't last long, though; she was soon running my hands up and down my body, feeling every inch of it under her new fingertips. "Oh . . . curves . . . oh, baby . . ."

My stomach lurched dangerously, causing me to gag. I wondered if it was possible to vomit while trapped in my mindscape. I didn't want to find out.

Cassandra was now bouncing up and down in my body, watching my breasts follow her movements. She giggled. "It's like living inside a bouncy castle!"

Beaming, Chip piped up excitedly, "Mistress is beautiful!"

"Absolutement!" Cassandra agreed cheerily. She glanced over at the frame that once held her; it was empty. "Oh, but look . . ."

Chip frowned sadly. "Oh . . . ! The brain lead expired . . . my old mistress is gone."

"But safe and sound in here," Cassandra replied happily, tapping my head with a finger.

"What of the Dahlia child's mind?" Chip questioned.

I scowled. I wasn't a child by any means, and I was certainly more mature than Cassandra could ever be. The way she was acting now proved that more than anything.

Tilting her head, Cassandra answered him, "I can sense her emotions, and she is very aware of what is going on. She doesn't like it . . ."
I banged on the invisible wall again. "You're damn right I don't fucking like it!" I shouted furiously.

Cassandra jumped and winced bringing a hand up to hold her temple.

"Mistress?" Chip asked worriedly.

"It's nothing. The girl just has a bit more kick than we planned. Nothing I can't handle. In fact . . . I can just about access her surface memory." She paused for a second as she looked through my most obvious memories.

A horrible thought occurred to me. How much could she access? How far down did surface memory go? I hadn't asked The Doctor anything about that; I hadn't thought I would need to! Stupid, stupid, stupid! If surface memory included recent thoughts, then Cassandra could learn about things she definitely shouldn't fucking know.

Panic swept through me, but this wasn't the first time I had fucked up, and it certainly wasn't the worst. I just had to figure out a way to her stop seeing my memory. But how could I do that?

What would The Doctor tell me to do? I looked around my mindscape. He would tell me to think and adapt, use my surroundings to my advantage. So how can I do that?

My mindscape was a library formed out of a mix between a winding labyrinth and the Winchester House. There were doors leading nowhere, but there were also doors that led to important places that should remain secret from people like Cassandra. The problem was I didn't know which doors were open or how many.

By now I could feel Cassandra reaching into my mind, searching for my memories. Her invasive aura made my skin crawl.

"Gosh . . . she's with the Doctor . . . a man . . ." Cassandra said thoughtfully.

Fury welled up in my gut. How dare she rifle through my mind like it was her own?! It was mine, not hers, even if she had taken over my body for the time being!

My face twisted into an ugly sneer.

"Get out," I growled out lowly. "I said 'get out'." She was still there, though, squirming around to her heart's content. "Get out!" I screamed, slamming both of my hands against the force field. I felt it ripple and quake beneath my fury, nearly collapsing under the force of my order. An echoing, singular bang sounded throughout my mindscape as every open door slammed shut at once. I forced Cassandra out of my mind as painfully as I could possibly make it, which was regretfully not as agonizing as I had hoped it would be.

Cassandra let out a shocked gasp, followed by a pained whine and clutched at her head.

"Mistress!" Chip exclaimed, rushing to her side.

"That little bitch!" Cassandra snarled. "She forced me out! She shouldn't be able to do that!"

"Mistress?"

Cassandra seemed ready to go on a rampage, but she suddenly reeled in her anger and composed herself, releasing a long sigh before smiling cheerily. "But it's all right. I'm fine, fine and dandy. Besides, after a few hours, she'll be gone, and this body will be all mine. It doesn't matter what she
does in the meantime." Narrowing her eyes, she said, "That man she's with . . . he's the Doctor . . . the same Doctor with a new face! That hypocrite! I must get the name of his surgeon! I could do with a little work . . ." She trailed off, patting my stomach and thighs.

I lashed out angrily again. The force field creaked beneath my fingertips.

Cassandra smirked. "She did not like that. Although . . ." She turned in the mirror and trailed her hand over my ass. "Nice rear bumper. Hmm?"

My phone was buzzing in my back pocket. Why had I put it there? Normally I would put it in one of my front pockets. Well, at least I hadn't left it in my cardigan.

Cassandra pulled my phone out of my pocket and held it up. "Oh . . . it seems to be ringing . . . is it meant to ring?"

"A primitive communications device," Chip told her.

After the phone was unlocked, The Doctor's voice flowed out of the speaker. "Dahlia, where are you?"

Turning to Chip, Cassandra whispered, "How does she speak?"

"Old Earth American," he supplied quietly.

She put the phone to her ear and hesitantly spoke into it, "Um . . . what's up?"

"Where've you been? How long does it take to get to Ward 26?"

"I'm on the way," she replied. "I shall proceed to the lift."

"You'll never guess. I'm with the Face of Bo! Remember him?" The Doctor asked excitedly.


"I'd better go. See you in a minute . . ." He said, trailing off distractedly, and then he hung up.

"This Doctor man is dangerous," Chip told Cassandra.

Cassandra nodded in agreement. "Dangerous and clever. I might need a mind like his. The Sisterhood is up to something. Remember that Old Earth saying . . ? Never trust a nun. Never trust a nurse. And never trust a cat. Perfume?"

Chip handed her a small bottle of her knock-out perfume, which she promptly shoved into my cleavage. Then we were all walking toward the lift and going to god knew where.

Cassandra walked my body out of the elevator and into Ward 26. She was constantly fixing my shirt and hair, which she had shaken from my ponytail. Cassandra seemed to have little to no experience with naturally curly hair because she had been continually spewing out a string of curses as she fussed with my hair.

I had never been so thankful for that rat's nest I called hair.

When we finally spotted The Doctor, he was examining different medicine drips, each of which
held a different type of medicine. Cassandra smiled at him when he turned to look at us.

"There you are! Come and look at this patient!" He grabbed my hand and tugged us over to a patient whose skin was a bright shade of red. Taking his glasses off, he explained, "Marconi's Disease. Should take years to recover. Two days. I've never seen anything like it—they've invented a cell washing cascade—it's amazing. Their medical science is way advanced. And this one—" He tugged us over to another man whose skin was whiter than paper. "Pallidome Pancrosis. Kills you in ten minutes, and he's fine!" he said cheerily, waving excitedly at the patient. "I need to find a terminal. I've got to see how they do this." Beaming, he interlaced his fingers with mine and tugged Cassandra and I along. "Because if they've got the best medicine in the world . . . then why's it such a secret?" The Doctor pondered out loud, looking over his should at "me".

I was surprised by the face he made. That was his deep thought face, though it was partly hidden beneath child-like happiness. I smirked. He knew something was wrong with me. And Cassandra had absolutely no clue.

Cassandra stopped walking and snorted. "I can't Adam and Eve it."

The Doctor turned back to Cassandra and tilted his head in confusion. "What's—what's with the voice?"

"Oh, I don't know . . . just larking around New Earth . . . New me . . ."

He smiled back. "Well, I can talk. New New Doctor."

"Mmm . . . aren't you just . . ." Cassandra purred, grabbing The Doctor by his jacket lapels and pulling him in for a rough kiss.

I let out another wave of fury. "You fucking harpy! Just wait until I get back control of my body. You're going to regret touching him if it's the last thing I do!"

Cassandra finally broke the kiss, walking away from The Doctor and breathing heavily. "Terminal's this way," she said breathlessly.

"Where's your cardigan?" The Doctor asked.

Funny, I hadn't thought he knew what a cardigan was.

He immediately had Cassandra's attention. "What?" she said, spinning around quickly.

"Your cardigan," he repeated. The muscles around his eyes twitched.

Cassandra shrugged off his question. "Oh . . . I left it downstairs." She then tugged down my Henley just a bit more. I really regretted wearing the lower cut bra today.

The Doctor's eyes flickered down to the newly exposed skin. A nice pink blush formed on his cheeks. That was actually a very nice thing to know; Nine didn't blush nearly as easily as I would've liked. Ten, however, was blushing at just a bit of skin, and the way his eyes were glazing over reminded me that I hadn't had the time to "break in" my new Doctor. I mean, I almost had, back in The Gardens of Reverent Monks, but I'd been a bit miffed by the aphrodisiac fumes to really give it much thought until now.

Pity. I would have to remedy that as soon as possible.

Cassandra led The Doctor to a terminal. He searched through every detail of the hospital and how
it worked.

He frowned. "Nope . . . nothing odd . . . surgery . . . post-op . . . nano-dentistry . . . no sign of a shop . . . they should have a shop."

Cassandra walked around The Doctor, frowning while she did so. "No, it's missing something else. When I was downstairs, those Nurse-Cat-Nuns were talking about Intensive Care. Where is it?"

At least Cassandra was good for something.

The Doctor nodded, his eyes never leaving the screen. "You're right, well done."

"Why would they hide a whole department?" Cassandra asked. "It's gotta be there somewhere. Search the sub-frame."

The Doctor took out his sonic, giving Cassandra a strange look out the corner of his eye. "What if the sub-frame's locked?"

She shrugged. "Try the installation protocol."

The Doctor turned his attention back to the screen. "Yeah, course. Sorry. Hold on." He clicked the sonic on, causing an entire section of wall of move and reveal a secret passageway.

Smirking, Cassandra walked in first, followed by The Doctor.


Cassandra and The Doctor walked down the metal steps that led to Intensive Care. They ended up in a huge room; it was so huge that it couldn't even really be called a room. The place was cavernous and filled to the brim with row upon row up glowing green test tube chambers. The Doctor walked along one of the rows until finally stopping at one and opening it.

The man looking back at us was covered in hideous boils. A cloud of smoke surrounded him inside the chamber.

"That's disgusting. What's wrong with him?" Cassandra sneered, taking a step back.

The Doctor's jaw dropped. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." He quickly shut the door and moved over to another chamber, opening it as well.

Holding my nose, Cassandra asked, "What disease is that?"

"All of them," The Doctor spat in disgust. "Every single disease in the galaxy, they've been infected with everything."

Cassandra was quick to ask, "What about us? Are we safe?"

"The air's sterile. Just don't touch them," The Doctor said, closing the chamber door. He turned and leaned over the railing, looking down at all the other capsules.

Cassandra followed him. "How many patients are there?"

"They're not patients," The Doctor bit out.

"But they're sick," Cassandra said.
The Doctor frowned deeply, his shoulders stiffening as he seethed. "They were born sick. They're meant to be sick. They exist to be sick. Lab rats. No wonder the Sisters have a cure for everything. They've built the ultimate research laboratory. A human farm."

"Why don't they just die?" Cassandra asked.

"Plague carriers," The Doctor spat. "The last to go."

"It's for the greater cause," a new voice interjected.

We all turned to look. It was of the Cat Nurses.

"Novice Hame, when you took your vows, did you agree to this?" The Doctor questioned angrily.

"The Sisterhood has sworn to help," she said simply.

Scowling, The Doctor shouted viciously, "What, by killing?"

"But they're not real people," Novice Hame offered gently. "They're specially grown. They have no proper existence."

I frowned. I may not be the best person in the universe, but at least I knew that if it could think for itself, then it was a real person.

The Doctor took several angry steps forward. "What's the turnover? Hm? Thousand a day? Thousand the next? Thousand the next? How many thousand? For how many years? How many?"

"Mankind needed us," Novice Hame explained calmly. "They came to this planet with so many illnesses. We couldn't cope. We did try. We tried everything. We tried using clone-meat and bio-cattle . . . but the results were too slow. So, the sisterhood grew its own flesh. That's all they are. Flesh."

"These people are alive," The Doctor growled back.

Novice Hame smiled serenely. "But think of those humans out there . . . healthy . . . and happy, because of us."

"If they live because of this," The Doctor said, gesturing to the entire room. "Then life is worthless."

Hame frowned. "But who are you to decide that?"

He took another step forward. "I'm the Doctor. And if you don't like it . . . if you want to take it to a higher authority, then there isn't one. It stops with me."

"Just to confirm . . . none of the Humans in the city actually know about this?" Cassandra asked suddenly, looking out from behind The Doctor.

Novice Hame nodded. "We thought it best not—"

"Hold on," The Doctor interrupted angrily, "I can understand the bodies. I can understand your vows. But one thing I can't understand—what have you done to Dahlia?"

Finally. It was about time that he started asking questions.

Frowning again, Novice Hame replied, "I don't know what you mean."
I swore The Doctor growled. "And I'm being very, very calm," he hissed. "You want to beware of that—very, very calm. And the only reason I'm being so very, very calm is that the brain is a delicate thing. Whatever you've done to Dahlia's head. I want it reversed. Now."

"We haven't done anything."

"I'm perfectly fine," Cassandra lied quickly.

The Doctor ignored her and focused his glare on Novice Hame. "These people are dying, and Dahlia would care. She would have told me that something was wrong with this place. And she definitely would have had some sort of reaction when I told her the Face of Boe was here."

Cassandra huffed and rolled my eyes. "Oh, all right, clever clogs." She gripped The Doctor's shoulder and spun him around to face us. Tugging on his tie flirtatiously, she purred, "Smarty pants." My voice became huskier when she spoke. "Lady killer."

"What's happened to you?" he pleaded, now soft eyes staring straight into mine.

I slammed my fists on the wall. "Doctor! Help me! I'm stuck in here! I don't know how to break the wall!"

"I knew something was going on in this hospital, apparently so did she. But I needed your Dahlia's body and your mind to fine it out."

The Doctor's eyes narrowed. "Who are you?"

Cassandra rolled onto the tips of my toes to whisper in his ear, "The Last Human."

The Doctor pulled back quickly in surprise and disgust. "Cassandra?"

"Wake up and smell the perfume," she said, removing the perfume vial from my cleavage. She sprayed it in The Doctor's face. As soon as he breathed it in, he was unconscious and fell to the floor.

Novice Hame rushed over and knelt by The Doctor. "You've hurt him!" she said. "I don't understand—I'll have to fetch Matron!"

Cassandra sneered. "You do that, 'cause I want to see her. Now, run along! Sound the alarm!"

With wide eyes, Novice Hame stood and ran from the room.

I watched helplessly when Cassandra lifted The Doctor and shoved him into one of the Intensive Care units. At least it wasn't easy for her. I didn't have a lot of upper body strength, and The Doctor wasn't exactly light, even if the newest regeneration was much slimmer than the last one.

I felt even worse when he woke up, though.

"Let me out! Let me out!" he shouted, banging on the glass.

Cassandra looked at him. "Aren't you lucky there was a spare? Standing room only."

"You've stolen Dahlia's body," The Doctor accused correctly.
"Over the years, I've thought of a thousand ways to kill you, Doctor. And now," Cassandra smiled brightly, "that's exactly what I've got. One thousand diseases. They pump the patients with a top-up every ten minutes. You've got about . . . three minutes left. Enjoy."

"No!" I screamed, slamming my hands onto the force field. "Doctor!" A sob caused my voice to crack. My current emotions were irrational; I knew The Doctor would get out. He wouldn't die, but I just couldn't control myself. What was I supposed to do? I loved him; he was trapped in a literal gas chamber; and I couldn't do a damn thing about it.

Letting out another desperate sound, I put as much force as I could behind one more solid punch to the force field.

A sound resembling splintering glass resounded throughout the room. My head snapped up to stare at my hand in shock.

Cracks spider-webbed out along the invisible wall from my fist. It looked like I was shattering the air. Staring at the cracks in shock, I wondered, *Is it possible to break it? And . . . what would happen if I did? Only one way to find out.*

Rearing back my fist again, I crashed it into the wall again. More cracks appeared, both big and small.

"Let Dahlia go, Cassandra," The Doctor ordered darkly.

Cassandra glared at him and clutched at my temple, wincing in pain. "Oh, I will! As soon as I've found someone younger and . . . less common . . . then I'll junk her with the waste. Hopefully I won't have to deal with her incessant temper tantrums for much longer."

"What? What are you talking about?" he asked.

"She keeps throwing fits," Cassandra spat, "throwing her anger around like it's nothing. She's even managed to crack the force field holding her back, the stupid girl." She then turned to the newly arrived cat nurses.

"Anything we can do to help?" the regular nurse asked.

"Straight to the point, Whiskers . . . I want money," Cassandra said

The Matron tilted her head to the side. "The Sisterhood is a charity. We don't give money. We only . . . accept."

Cassandra glared at her and attempted some weird mixture of bargaining and threatening: "The humans across the water pay you a fortune. And that's exactly what I need. A one-off payment. That's all I want . . . oh, and perhaps a yacht. In return for which, I shall tell the city nothing of your institutional murder. Is that a deal?"

While the other cat nurse pulled out a remote and began pressing some of its buttons, the Matron shook her head. "I'm afraid not."

"I'd really advise you to think about this," Cassandra threatened.

The Matron shook her head. "There's no need. I have to decline."

"I'll tell them! And you've no way of stopping me!" Cassandra shouted hysterically. "You're not exactly Nuns with Guns—you're not even armed!"
"Who needs arms when we have claws?" the Matron hissed angrily, retracting her claws.

Cassandra scowled. "Well, nice try." She spun around, calling out to Chip, who snapped out of his hiding place at her shout. "Chip? Plan B!"

Chip immediately pulled a lever, causing all the cell doors to swing open.

I glared out through the barrier. "Cassandra, you idiot. All you do is create messes from bigger messes. At least you managed to set The Doctor free, too."

Stepping out of his cell, The Doctor turned to Cassandra and shouted, "What've you done?"

Smirking, Cassandra said, "Gave the system a shot of adrenaline, just to wake 'em up. See ya!" She then ran down the walkway, away from The Doctor.

The Doctor immediately followed. I could hear him gaining on us, his long legs giving him an advantage despite Cassandra's head start.

Doors continued to open as Cassandra ran. Some opened a bit closer than she expected, causing her to scream loudly. I could feel my vocal chords strain; I couldn't remember the last time I had screamed like that.

The Doctor had soon caught up to Cassandra, and they continued running until the end of the row stopped them. They looked down a long hall of tunnels and then around at all the infected people leaving their cells.

"Oh my god," Cassandra whispered in horror.

The Doctor glared scathingly at her. "What the hell have you done?"

"It wasn't me!" she snapped back.

"One touch and you get every disease in the world," The Doctor said. "And I want that body safe, Cassandra! We've gotta go down!"

But Cassandra stayed put as the infected began closing in.

"Do as he says, Cassandra!" I snarled, slamming my fist on the barrier.

"But there's thousands of them!" she shrieked.

I couldn't tell whether she was talking to me or The Doctor.

"Run!" The Doctor shouted, ordering Cassandra again. "Down! Down! Get down!"

This time Cassandra complied, dashing down the stairs as fast as she possibly could with The Doctor hot on her tail.

The PA system clicked on. Now, normally I wouldn't have paid it any attention while I was running for my life but seeing as I wasn't the one in control of my body at the moment, I kind of had no choice but to take note of what the female voice said. "This building is under quarantine. Repeat—this building is under quarantine. No one may leave the premises. Repeat no one may leave the premises."

Cassandra glanced back at the infected following us. Most had their arms outstretched like some real-life version of a B-rated horror movie.
"Keep going!" The Doctor ordered. "Go down!"

He and Cassandra kept running until they had run down the last flight of stairs and through the door that led to the cellar. Cassandra immediately ran to the elevators.

"No," The Doctor said, stopping behind her. "The lifts have closed down. That's the quarantine, nothing's moving."

"This way!" Cassandra said suddenly, dashing in the opposite direction.

The Doctor obviously followed, even though their ways of escape were quickly being cut off. More and more infected were pouring in from almost every direction. I was so busy warning Cassandra of different infected that I almost didn't see Chip huddled up in a corner.

"Someone will touch him!" The Doctor cried out, moving back a few paces and toward Chip.

Cassandra grabbed his arm. "Leave him! He's just a clone thing, he's only got a half-life—come on!"

"Mistress!" Chip wailed pathetically, staring up at Cassandra.

But Cassandra was already running away. The Doctor paused, but only to tell Chip, "I'm sorry, I can't let her escape" before following Cassandra.

Cassandra ran back to the room where she had first stolen my body. Once she and The Doctor were both inside, they slammed the door shut firmly behind them. Cassandra then ran to the opposite side of the room, opening that door to try and escape, but she was cut off by another group of infected trying to get in. She slammed the door shut.

"We're trapped! What're we going to do?" she shouted.

The Doctor turned his glare on her. "Well, for starters, you're going to leave that body." He examined the psychograft Cassandra had used on me, scanning it with his sonic screwdriver. "That psychograft is banned on every civilized planet! You're compressing Dahlia to death!"

"Oh please! Like she's in any real danger! That little bitch has been giving me trouble ever since I took over!" she barked back at him. "Besides, I've got nowhere to go. My original skin's dead."

"Not my problem," he growled. "You can float as atoms in the air. Now, get out." He pointed the sonic at her threateningly, his finger pressing warningly on the button. "Give her back to me."

I scowled. Another issue. While I wanted Cassandra out of my body, I couldn't remember enough about this adventure to save us. We needed The Doctor if any of us were going to survive. So, I formed a grip around Cassandra's consciousness, and when she tried to leave my mind, I kept her firmly in place.

She screamed and clutched her head.

"What's going on?" The Doctor asked. "Cassandra? What the hell did you do?!"

I weakened my hold on her enough that she could speak.

"I didn't do anything!" she snapped at him, wincing and continuing to clutch her head. "Your little girlfriend won't let me leave. She says it's a bad idea, that right now you're needed more than she is."
The Doctor's eyes softened. "Dahlia, please."

Scowling, I shook my head stubbornly and began to tighten my grip on Cassandra again. But this time she felt it coming and jumped from my body to The Doctor's. As soon as she was out of my body, I clutched at my head to try and soothe the forming headache. I glared at The Doctor's body.

Cassandra twisted his body around. "Oh, my. This is . . . different." She shifted around again to try and get a better look at his body, saying in an astonished tone, "Goodness me, I'm a man. Yum. So many parts! And hardly used . . ." After wiggling around like a crazed worm, she tapped The Doctor's chest. "Ah . . . ah! Two hearts! Oh, baby, I'm beating out a samba!"

"Cassandra!" I snapped. "Shut up and get moving!" I pointed up the ladder.

She ignored me in typical Cassandra fashion. Giggling, she said, "Oh, he's slim. And a little bit foxy." She looked me in the eyes. "You've thought so too. I've been inside your head . . . You've been looking . . . and you like it."

I gave her a dull look. "Do you expect me to blush? We're together, you insignificant bitch, of course I like it. Now move your ass."

Cassandra looked like she was about to retort, but another wave of infected people bursted into the room and interrupted her. She started to panic again.

"Cassandra! Start climbing!"

Finally, she moved. I maneuvered out of the way before she could push me and climbed right after her. We made it three fourths up the ladder before I began issuing orders.

"Cassandra, get out of The Doctor's body. We need him if we're going to get out of here alive."

"Yap yap yap," Cassandra mocked. "It was torture inside your head, do you know that? For such a little girl, you've got a bunch of anger inside of you. Don't know how The Doctor puts up with it." She winced. "Apparently he likes your temper. Says it keeps him in check when he's wrong."

Gritting my teeth, I felt the back of my neck prickle. Gasping, I managed to pull my foot out of The Matron's reach, clambering up a few more ladder rungs before looking down at her.

"All our good work! All that healing," The Matron spat. "The good name of the Sisterhood—you have destroyed everything!"

Rolling her eyes, Cassandra dismissed her words. "Go and play with a ball of string."

"Shut the fuck up, Cassandra, or I'll force you out of The Doctor's body and leave you here!" I threatened, turning to glare up at her.

"Everywhere—disease!" The Matron continued. "This is the Human World. Sickness!" She let out a horrified gasp. One of the infected had grasped her ankle and was pulling her downwards. Letting out a wail of pain, The Matron broke out in the same boils that the other infected were practically branded with. She fell down the ladder; the infected watched her fall blankly for several moments before continuing up the ladder.

"Go! Cassandra, go!" I ordered when I saw she wasn't moving.

Whimpering, she obeyed.
The PA system clicked on again. "Maximum quarantine. Divert all shuttles."

We climbed and climbed until we reached the very top, but there was no way out. The doors were sealed.

"Now what do we do?" Cassandra asked angrily.

I climbed until we were balancing almost on the same ladder rung. "Give me the sonic." Doing this would save time that we didn't have.

Cassandra fumbled with The Doctor's pockets before finally producing the sonic. I snatched it from her hand and turned it to the correct setting. Pointing it at the doors and pushing the button, I waited for the doors to swing open. Only problem was, they remained firmly shut.

"Was that supposed to do something?" Cassandra asked snottily.

I handed the sonic back to her. "Shut up and get out of his body. The sonic's not working for me. We need him to open the doors."

"He's angry with that idea."

"I don't give a fuck if he doesn't like it! Now do as I say!"

I hated the feeling of being shoved into a corner of my own mind as Cassandra entered me again.

The Doctor glared at Cassandra, growling, "Get out of her!"

"We need you, Doctor," Cassandra said, attempting to pathetically reason with him.

He then shouted angrily, "I order you to leave her!"

Cassandra immediately obeyed, jumping back into his body. "No matter how difficult the situation, there is no need to shout."

"Cassandra," I growled at her.

"I can't go into you, he simply refuses—he's so rude."

"And he can get his lily-white ass over it, or I'll rip him a new one."

Cassandra's face suddenly twisted into a disgusted expression. She muttered angrily, "Oh, I am so gonna regret this . . ." Then she leaped into and infected body.

The Doctor immediately opened the lift doors, climbing up and inside and reaching down for me. As soon as I was safely inside the doors, The Doctor gripped my face in both hands and kissed me furiously. When he pulled away, he managed to mumble against my lips, "It's so good to have you back."

I smiled serenely at him before twisting the smile into a scowl and punching his chest. "You won't be thinking that in a few minutes, you idiot! How could you be so stupid?! It's not like we—"

Cassandra cut off my rant by jumping into my body again.

Scowling angrily, The Doctor shut the doors. "That was your last warming, Cassandra."

Cassandra ignored him, choosing instead to stare vacantly into space as she thought. When she spoke, it was in such a soft tone that she could barely be heard. "Inside her head . . . they're so
alone . . . they keep reaching out, just to hold us . . . all their lives and they've never been touched . . ."

Sighing, The Doctor held out a hand for her to take. He helped her up, and they walked down the hall that seemed to lead to Ward 26. When they got there, a woman leaped down, waving a chair at them dangerously. The Doctor moved protectively in front of my body, holding his hands up as he did so.

"We're safe! We're safe! We're safe. We're clean! We're clean! Look, look—"

The woman cut him off. "Show me your skin."

The Doctor and Cassandra showed her their hands, each of them flipping their hands over multiple times to show that they were disease-free.

"Look! Clean. Look—if we'd been touched, we'd be dead," The Doctor continued on insistently.

The woman finally nodded her agreement and lowered the chair.

The Doctor frowned. "So, how's it going up here? What's the status?"

"There's nothing but silence from the other wards. I think we're the only ones left. And I've been trying to override the quarantine," the woman said. She held up a small device. "If I can trip a signal over to New New York, they can send a private executive squad."

The Doctor's response was immediate. "You can't do that. If they forced entry, they'd break quarantine."

"I'm not dying here," the woman retorted with a glare.

"We can't let a particle of disease get out—there is ten million people in that City, they'd all be at risk!" The Doctor exclaimed. "Now, turn that off!"

Her lip curled back as she sneered at him. "Not if it gets me out."

"All right, fine," The Doctor seethed quietly. "So, I have to stop you lot as well. Suits me. Dahlia. Novice Hame. Everyone! Excuse me your grace—get me intravenous solutions for every single disease. Move it!"

His tone sparked people into action. Soon the entire room was bustling with people gathering up solutions and dumping them into a pile while I directed Cassandra on how to tie them all neatly to the rope The Doctor had neatly wrapped around his body.

The Doctor looked into Cassandra's eyes and asked, "How's that? Will it do?"

Cassandra started to snap out her own reply, but I told her to give him mine instead. She frowned. "She says that it is, but you'll need another pair of hands if it's to work properly. What is it that you're doing?"

The Doctor nodded thoughtfully, muttering, "Just like I thought." He opened the lift doors with his sonic and peered down the elevator shaft.

"The lifts aren't working," Cassandra said.

"Not moving. Different thing," he replied calmly. He then stepped back a few feet from the doors. "Here we go." He stuck the sonic between his teeth and ran.
"But you're not going to—" Cassandra started, but The Doctor cut her off as he jumped into the shaft and clutched to the rope that hung there, swinging slightly because of his leftover momentum. "What do you think you're doing?!" she cried out.

Taking the sonic from between his teeth, The Doctor began fixing the wrench. "I'm going down. Come on!"

"Not in a million years," Cassandra said tonelessly.

I scowled at her. "Hurry the fuck up, Cassandra, or I'll do it myself."

"I need another pair of hands," The Doctor explained, staring at her. "What do you think? If you're so desperate to stay alive . . . why not live a little?"

Hearing someone shout for the doors to be closed, I made the decision for her. I smashed through the weakest point in the barrier and reached through mentally, managing to take control of my body. I got a running start and leaped for The Doctor, landing more gracefully on his back than I thought I could achieve.

"Dahlia?" The Doctor choked out, but it was too late. I was already back behind the barrier, nursing the mental wounds that had occurred when I stepped outside the barrier.

"Now I see why she loves you," Cassandra groaned lowly,挂着 her head as she also adjusted to the pain. "You two are absolutely mad, just perfect for each other."

"I've known that for a while now. And she's not as mad as I am, just more stubborn. What did she do, anyway?" he demanded.

"She broke through the barrier," Cassandra croaked out.

The Doctor frowned briefly before returning to his determined expression. "Going down!" And then we were falling down the elevator shaft. The Doctor was yelling, though it was more from excitement, while Cassandra's continuous wail was one of terror. The ride didn't last nearly as long as I thought it would, though that was probably because I wasn't really experiencing it. When we reached the bottom, Cassandra and The Doctor dropped to the elevator's roof.

Once she regained her breath, Cassandra joked, "Well, that's one way to lose weight."

"Now listen," The Doctor said. "When I say so, take hold of that lever."

"There's still a quarantine down there, we can't—" Cassandra interrupted.

"Don't you dare start that, Cassandra," he said lowly. He continued, his voice gradually growing into a shout. "You are holed up the body of a woman I care very deeply about and have been nothing but a hindrance so far, endangering her and everyone else on this planet. If Dahlia were in control of her body instead of you, we would've been done by now! So, hold that lever!"

To say I was surprised would be an understatement. The Doctor expressing how he felt about me always shocked me, especially when a bit of The Oncoming Storm peeked out in times like this.

Cowering, Cassandra nodded meekly and shifted over to the lever in question.

The Doctor moved his glare from Cassandra to the cap on the clear containment holding the disinfectant. He unscrewed it and began talking, "I'm cooking up a cocktail. I know a bit about medicine myself." He hurriedly ripped the tops off the solution packets with his teeth and dumped
their contents into the tank. "Now, that lever's going to resist. But keep it in position." He opened the hatch that led inside the elevator. "Hold onto it with everything you've got."

"What about you?" Cassandra hesitantly asked.

Smirking, The Doctor replied, "I've got an appointment. The Doctor is in." He then leaped down the hatch and into the elevator. Opening the doors with the sonic, he shouted, "I'm in here, come in!"

"Don't tell them!" Cassandra cried out in shock.

"Pull that lever!" The Doctor ordered, ignoring her.

Cassandra did as he said, shoving all her borrowed weight onto the lever; it creaked but did as she bid.

"Come and get me, come on! I'm in here, come on," The Doctor called out to the infected reaching out to him.

The PA system in the elevator clicked on. "Commence stage one—disinfection."

Disinfectant mixed with medicine rained down on The Doctor and the infected, soaking them thoroughly.

"Hurry up, come on," The Doctor beckoned. "Come on, come on."

More infected followed his call, stumbling into the elevator and also being showered with the solution.

"All they wanna do is pass it on. Pass it on," he shouted enthusiastically.

"Pass on what?" Cassandra demanded. "Pass on what?"

"Cassandra," I called out. Maybe she would listen to me and shut up for a moment. "The cure. He's telling them to pass on the cure. If you were watching, you would be able to see it."

"Pass it on!" The Doctor repeated, watching the infected pass on the cure. Beaming up at Cassandra, he walked over and helped her down from the elevator's roof, setting her down beside him.

The first thing out of Cassandra's mouth was: "They're passing on a cure? So, you didn't kill them? Any of them at all?"

"No," he said simply. "That's your way of doing things." The Doctor walked out into the crowd of newly cured humans. "I'm the Doctor, and I cured them."

The new humans looked around at their surroundings, taking everything in with a sense of child-like wonder and excitement. A woman wandered up to The Doctor and hugged him.

Smiling, The Doctor spoke gently to her, "That's right! Hey, hey! There we go, sweetheart! Aye? Look at him . . ." He softly maneuvered her to sit by another new human. "Go on, that's it! That's it! It's a new sub-species, Cassandra!" The Doctor started moving through the crowd, peering at different new humans as he went. "A brand-new form of life! New Humans! Look at them, look!" Bending down, he grinned at the faces of several other sitting humans. "Grown by cats . . . kept in the dark, fed by tubes . . . but completely, completely alive!" He spun around to face Cassandra,
who was trying to decide whether or not to leave the doorway of the elevator. Pointing to her, The Doctor say, "You can't deny them, because you helped create them!"

She rolled her eyes at his enthusiasm.

"The human race just keeps on going. Keeps on changing. Life will not go out! Ha!"

When we got back to Ward 26, the hospital was swarming with police officers.

The PA system clicked on. "All staff will present themselves to the officers for immediate arrest. I repeat—immediate arrest. All new life forms will be catalogued and taken into care."

We saw Novice Hame being led away in handcuffs. She caught The Doctor's eyes. He did not smile.

"All visitors to the hospital will be required to make a statement to the NNYPD," the person on the PA continued.

The Doctor jolted. "The Face of Boe!" he exclaimed, suddenly remembering the reason we came to this planet. He took off running down the hall, his soaked shoes squeaking the entire time.

Cassandra followed him, albeit at a slower pace.

When she got to the Face of Bo's room, The Doctor was already approaching him. "You were supposed to be dying."

The Face of Bo smiled. "There are better things to do today. Dying can wait."

I noticed that the man in the suit and helmet was there, standing loyally by Boe's side, his back completely straight. It might seem odd, but I swore he was smiling, too.

Cassandra huffed and rolled her eyes. "Oh, I hate telepathy. Just what I need, a head full of big face."

Scowling, I reached through the barrier and reprimanded her. She winced and rubbed her head.

"What is wrong with Dahlia?" The Face of Boe asked, frowning.

The Doctor returned his frown. "She's been through a psychograft."

"That's rather sad. I thought I might have a chance to tell her in person, rather than the other method we had planned." The Face of Boe sighed. "But I suppose it can't be helped. She did warn us that this would happen." He looked at the helmeted man and nodded.

The man nodded back and reached into his pocket for something, producing a piece of thick paper. He walked over to Cassandra, handing it out to her. She stared at his outstretched hand blankly.

"She told you what?" The Doctor questioned, his frown deepening. "What's that paper?"

"It's something that's between us and her, Doctor, though this Dahlia hasn't been that far back in time yet. Don't worry yourself with it, Doctor," The Face of Boe said serenely.

Furrowing his eyebrows, The Doctor nodded, saying, "I understand, but why not give that to me
for safekeeping?"

The helmeted man laughed, not taking his "eyes" off of Cassandra. "So that you don't try and peek at it, Doctor. And don't try and deny it, you know you would. Anything that concerns Dahlia, you have to be a part of." This time he addressed Cassandra. "Take it and don't look at it. It's not yours to see."

Cassandra nodded, taking the paper and slipping it into her front pocket.

The man inclined his head forward in a slight bow before moving back to The Face of Boe’s side.

Boe looked to The Doctor again. "I have grown tired with the universe, Doctor, but you have taught me to look at it anew."

Hesitating for a moment, The Doctor seemed to decide something and knelt in front of him. "There are legends you know, saying that you're millions of years old."

Boe chuckled. "There are? That would be impossible." He gave me a sly glance, smirking slightly as he did so.

If The Doctor noticed, he ignored it. "Wouldn't it just," he said with a smile. Pausing, he stared intently at Bo. "I got the impression... there was something you wanted to tell me..."

"A great secret," The Face of Boe breathed, his whole being seemed to get heavier, which was quite the feat given that he was just a head.

I perked up, pressing myself closely to the barrier. If only I could tell The Doctor what that secret was. Briefly, I wondered if The Face of Bo would tell The Doctor the secret now, given that I had apparently interfered so much in his timeline.

"So, the legend says," The Doctor said, leaning in close.

The Face of Boe took a deep breath. "It can wait," he said rather anticlimactically.

"Oh, does it have to?" The Doctor pouted.

Boe gave him a barely-there smile. "We shall meet again, Doctor, for the third time... for the last time... and the truth shall be told. Until that day..." With a final look at me, The Face of Boe and the helmeted man teleported away.

"That is enigmatic. That—that is – that is textbook enigmatic," The Doctor muttered, standing and staring at the spot where the two males stood only a few seconds ago. He then turned around and faced Cassandra. "And now for you."

She attempted to look bored, but I could sense her fear as she spoke. "But... everything's happy. Everything's fine... can't you just leave me?"

He shook his head at her. "You've lived long enough. Leave that body and end it, Cassandra."

I could feel the tears drip down my cheeks as Cassandra began crying.

"I don't want to die!"

"No one does," The Doctor retorted.

"Help me!" she ordered desperately.
"I can't."

Something caught my attention out the corner of my eye. I forced Cassandra to look. Chip was hovering at the entrance of the room.

"Mistress!" he cried out.

"Ah!" Cassandra said, either in shock or happiness, I didn't know. "You're alive!"

Nodding, Chip said, "I kept myself safe. For you, mistress."

Cassandra could be stupid at times, but I could feel her thoughts as her mind quickly came up with an idea. "A body," she murmured. "And not just that, a volunteer . . ."

The Doctor glared at her. "Don't you dare. He's got a life of his own."

"But I worship the mistress!" Chip exclaimed. "I welcome her."

"You can't, Cassandra, you—" But Cassandra didn't give him the chance to finish. She had already leapt from my body and into Chip's.

My knees buckled from the strain of taking my consciousness again, and I swayed dangerously from side-to-side. My head ached obnoxiously.

The Doctor was at my side immediately, wrapping his arms around me and taking my weight to make sure I didn't fall.

"Dahlia? You all right?" he asked anxiously.

Nodding, I clutched at his suit jacket, breathing in his scent as deeply as I could to get my mind in order. "Yeah, yeah, I'm good. Just need to catch my breath for a moment."

He smiled against my hair. I could feel him kissing my top of my head and rubbing my back soothingly. "I was so worried," he muttered. "I thought I had lost you."

"It'll take more than that for you to get rid of me, Doctor," I replied, squeezing him closer to me.

Of course, Cassandra had to ruin our moment. "Oh, sweet Lord. I'm a walking doodle," she said, looking down at Chip's body.

The Doctor loosened his hold on me but only so that he could turn to Cassandra and wrap an arm around my waist. "You can't stay in there. I'm sorry, Cassandra, but that's not fair. I can take you to the City. They can build you a skin tank and you can stand trial for what you've done."

"Well, that would be rather dramatic. Possibly my finest hour," she said, smiling and giggling like it was some sort of private joke. "And certainly my finest hat." She paused, and her smile fell away. "But I'm afraid we don't have time. Poor little Chip is only a half-life. And he's been through so much. His heart is racing so. He's failing. I don't think he's going to last—" She collapsed. The Doctor and I barely managed to get to her before she hit the floor.

"You all right?" The Doctor asked kindly.

She took a shaky breath. "I'm fine. I'm dying, but that's fine."

"I can take you to the city," he offered.
I shook my head just as Cassandra did. "No, Doctor, she knows what she wants to do."

"She's right," Cassandra said. "Everything's new on this planet. There's no place for Chip and me anymore. You're right, Doctor. It's time to die." She swallowed thickly. "And that's good."

The Doctor and I helped Cassandra to her feet and led her to the TARDIS. She clutched at us. "Just as she said. There's one last thing I can do."

The TARDIS' engine stopped. The Doctor and I moved away from the console and toward Cassandra. I got to her first and helped her to her feet.

"I suppose I should thank you," I said.

She laughed. "For what? Stealing your body? Nearly getting you killed? Nearly getting The Doctor killed?"

Smiling wryly, I said, "No. For not letting me die."

She snorted. "Oh please, you did most of the work. I didn't want to listen to you at all." She suddenly sobered. "You deserve thanks much more than I do. So, thank you for this." She held onto my hand the entire time as we walked out of the TARDIS and into a roaring party. We could all clearly see Cassandra, proper, human, Cassandra, at the center of the party. Nearly everyone was paying attention to her as she laughed and told her story.

Cassandra let go of my hand and look at The Doctor and me. "Thank you."

"Just go," The Doctor said, his tone was so calm that I couldn't tell what he was thinking. "And don't look back."

I gave her a close-lipped smile, silently giving her encouragement, no matter how bitter it may have been.

Cassandra walked off through the crowd, heading toward her past self.

"And if you'd actually seen them, they were shocked!" Past Cassandra exclaimed, causing the crowd to laugh. "But don't quote me on that. Oh, naughty. À bientôt!"

Past Cassandra walked away from the crowd, sipping on her drink. Cassandra then approached her, "Excuse me . . . Lady Cassandra . . ."

"Hm?" Past Cassandra waved her off. "I'm sorry, I don't need anything right now—I'm fine, thank you." She then turned away.

"No," Cassandra said, getting Past Cassandra's attention. "I just wanted to say . . . you look beautiful."

Past Cassandra looked at her, a strange look on her face. "Well. That's very kind, you strange little thing. Thank you very much."

"I mean it," Cassandra said insistently. She took a step closer to Past Cassandra and stared into her eyes. With the sincerest voice I had heard from someone in a long time, Cassandra said, "You look . . . so beautiful."
Something seemed to click in Past Cassandra, and the odd look fell from her face, instead being replaced by something much more heartfelt. "Thank you."

Chip's body then collapsed.

Past Cassandra dropped her glass—it shattered when it hit the floor—and kneeled next to Chip's body. "Oh, my Lord. Are you all right? What is it? What's wrong? Someone get some help!" she shouted, gathering Chip's body into her arms. "Call a medic or something, quickly!"

"Who is he?" a woman from the crowd asked.

"I don't know," Past Cassandra said, shaking her head. "He just came up to me. I don't even know his name. He just collapsed. I think he's dying. Someone do something! I've got you sweetheart . . . it's alright . . ." She began rocking Chip's body, murmuring to it. "There you are . . . there you are, I've got you . . . it'll be all right. There, there, you poor little thing . . ."

The Doctor entwined his hand with mine. I looked up at him. His gaze was questioning. After a second of debate, I nodded, following him as he pulled me into the TARDIS and away from Cassandra's fate.

The hot water of the shower poured down onto me as I rubbed myself down with some lime scented body wash. I felt disgusting, like I still had someone crawling inside my mind. I wasn't sure how I was supposed to get the feeling to go away. No matter how hard I scrubbed, the feeling remained. Maybe The Doctor would know something, but for now, I was content to scrub myself raw as I practically boiled myself for over half an hour.

Speaking of The Doctor, he was still in the medbay. After we had flown into the Time Vortex, he had led me there and given me a thorough examination. I let him do as he pleased. I knew we needed to know there wouldn't be any horrible side effects of the psychograft.

After leaving the shower, I dried myself off and put on some pajamas. I just wanted to sleep for eternity, but as soon as I climbed into bed, I knew I wouldn't be able to sleep. Whether it was an aftereffect of the psychograft, or just the type of day I had had, I wouldn't be sleeping for a while.

I let out an annoyed huff and turned over on my side. I spotted the piece of paper the helmeted man had given Cassandra at The Face of Boe's request. Sitting up, I grabbed it; upon closer inspection, it wasn't paper but parchment.

Why would Jack want me to have this? He said he had to tell me something important, and it only regarded me, not The Doctor, I thought. Well, only one way to find out.

Unfolding the parchment, I stared at the bold black ink that was typed onto the paper:

Dahlia,

I urge you to be cautious. Danger lurks ever closer, as does your future. When the time comes, The Doctor won't be able to save you. You'll be on your own and finding your way back to him won't be easy. You'll lose parts of yourself and gain new ones. The hardships you will be forced to bear will threaten to break you.

But you won't regret a single second of it. When you fail, you learn. When you succeed, lives
are saved. Never forget who you are, Dahlia, and always remember that you have friends who will always help you.

Your friend,

Jack

I stared at the letter. Tears burned my eyes, but I didn't have the energy left in me to let them fall.

Refolding the letter, I curled up on my side with the letter hugged against my chest. The TARDIS shut off the lights in my room and quieted her engines' hum.

Thank you, Jack.
"For the last time, I'm not gonna wear any parachute pants," I told the TARDIS for what seemed like the thousandth time. "The Doctor isn't even gonna land in the 1970s. He's gonna miss, and we're gonna end up in the 1870s." I scowled at the rack I had just finished looking through. Nothing on it seemed appropriate and comfortable to run in. I was going to meet The Queen for God's sake!

"Are there any suits that you think would work? Nothing too fancy or flimsy. I need something durable that can handle running for my life or away from some horrible monster but also not too casual. It needs to look like I put a lot of effort when all I did was sit here and talk to a sentient time machine who picked my outfit for me."

The TARDIS whirred and hummed. The rack I had just finished retracted, and a new one replaced it almost instantly. It was filled with different suits that ranged from a hundred years before my time to most likely several centuries in the future, judging from the wild and brightly designed style.

I sighed at the multitude of choices. Oh well . . . at least they were organized by period.

Choosing to be simple and stay within my century, I gradually shifted suits around to make the choice easier. Bright colors and patterns were the first to go, quickly followed by the frilliest, overdone styles—too much fabric, not enough breathing or running room. Soon enough, I had wheedled down my choices to the most "normal" suits styles. After very little consideration, the Classic fits were discarded, along with most of the Modern fits. They seemed a bit too baggy to me, especially since I was going to be seen alongside The Doctor in his Extreme Slim fit and I wanted to at least seem a bit in sync.

I had only a dozen different suits left to choose from, but several more were discarded for their coloring. I wanted charcoal gray, not white, black, brown, or light grey; it would be a good balance to The Doctor's brown pinstriped suit.

Four left. Discard the Modern. Three Slim fit. One wasn't the right cut, pants too long for my legs and waist too narrow for my hips—gone. Two left. Both single-breasted with two buttons, but one had a notch lapel with side vents while the other had a peak lapel and a center vent.

The peak lapel was a bit too fashion forward for me and I hated center vents (On me. The Doctor pulled them off magnificently), so there was only one other choice. Pulling the suit off the rack, I was relieved to see that it was a cotton-blend, not pure cotton or (goddamn) wool.

With my selection made, I put it on and was pleased to find that it was indeed very moveable. The fabric wasn't too stiff; the pants' waistline didn't cut into my stomach; and even the shirt (colored a pretty white and purple plaid) was so well tailored that the buttons didn't do that horrible gaping thing across my breasts like other button up shirts did, and the collar gently rested against the hollow of my throat instead of feeling like I was being slowly strangled. That prompted me to pick a deep purple tie to tuck into the waistcoat. However, I did decide to leave the jacket off and roll the shirt sleeves up to my elbows. Scotland was more of a humid climate, and I hated sweating.

I was fixing my hair in a half up, half down style when The Doctor spoke up.

"Dahlia? Are you done yet? You've been in there for hours!" The Doctor whined from the other side of the door.
I looked at the clock on the wall. It hadn't even been forty-five minutes. "'Hours', he says," I mocked, smoothing down my waistcoat one more time before putting on a sturdy but comfortable pair of dull black loafers.

The Doctor was leaning against the opposite wall, pouting. He perked up when I opened the door but tilted his head in confusion at my outfit. "Why're you wearing that?" He then held up his hands defensively as he backtracked, "Not that you don't look gorgeous in it, but . . . I thought we decided on Ian Dury at the Top Rank, Sheffield, England, Earth, 21st November 1979. That's not exactly what you go to a concert in."

I gave him a dull look. "Like you have any room to talk about proper attire. You wear those suits wherever or whenever we go."

"Oi!" he pouted, pulling at his suit lapel. "My suits are timeless! They're stylish wherever we go. You like them . . . don't you?"

Oh, now he looked upset. He looked like a kicked puppy, standing there and tugging at his suit. I sighed and walked closer to him. Pulling his hands away from his suit and putting them on my hips, I smoothed his jacket and stood on my tiptoes.

"I adore your suits, Doctor," I murmured, tracing my hands up and down his chest. "You looked so handsome in them, though, if I remember correctly . . ." My lips hovered over his. I could feel his breathing become heavy as he listened to me talk. "You look much better without them." I lightly kissed him but pulled away when he tried to deepen it. I smirked at the high-pitched whining noise he made when I did. "But that was a while ago, wasn't it? Maybe my memory's faded . . ."

"We could find out right now," The Doctor panted back. His eyes were glazed over, and he kept licking his lips.

Furrowing my eyebrows, I stared at him in confusion. "But then we'd miss the concert." And then I pulled away, internally smirking when I felt his hard on brush against my hip with the action.

The Doctor sputtered, stumbling to regain his composure and follow me down the hallway at the same time. "This is a time machine!" he said desperately. "We can go later! Not like 1979 is going anywhere!"

"How do you know it isn't?" I shot back.

"What?" he stammered.

Shrugging, I continued walking. "Stranger things have happened other than time periods going missing."

"B-but—!"

Upon entering the console room, I spun around to face The Doctor. "Later, Theta, but for now . . . impress me."

He pouted again but then grinned widely and sprinted over to the console. I giggled and clung to part of the railing. The Doctor excitedly pushed buttons and moved levers, muttering to himself all the while. Briefly, I wondered if I had given him a challenge I shouldn't have, but the engines were already whirring to life. Too late now.
When the TARDIS landed, The Doctor stumbled, nearly falling over while he laughed. I snickered at his delighted behavior; it was good to see him so happy. Hell, it felt good to be this happy. I hadn't realized how tired I was of being serious and dealing with anger and gloomy topics.

The Doctor noticed my good mood. He bounded over to me, taking both my hands in his and pulling me toward the doors.

"Dahlia," he said excitedly. "There's so many places I can't wait to take you! So many time periods that I just know you'll love! China invades Vietnam, the first antigravity Olympics, swimming in the Yumeri Ocean, The Muppet Movie! Love that movie . . . Margaret Thatcher, Belladari O'Sharre, Freddari's Grand Orchestra, Skylab falls to Earth . . . with a little help from me."

I smiled fondly. "Of course, it would be your fault that it fell."

"It was so not my fault!" he said indignantly. "I just helped it along, that's all."

My eyebrows raised up. "So, it was on purpose then?"

"What? No! That-that's not what I meant—" he sputtered defensively, letting go of my hands to run his frantically through his hair. "It was an accident!"

I giggled. "I'm sure it was, Doctor."

He pouted. "It was!" Reaching for the door, he opened it. "It so was an . . ." Guns clicked as they prepared to fire. " . . . Accident," The Doctor finished. "1879, same difference."

Rolling my eyes, I shook my head and sighed. One could never be mentally prepared to face The Queen's guard, after all. "I didn't know a concert and a gun to the face were the same thing. Perhaps you should enlighten me about that the next time we get the chance."

The Doctor pulled a face at me, but the Captain began speaking. "You will explain your presence. And the strange dress of this girl."

The Doctor immediately perked up. "Are we in Scotland?" he asked, instantly melding into a Scottish accent. I fought a giggle down; I absolutely adored Ten's Scottish accent.

"How can you be ignorant of that?" the Captain demanded, his eyes narrowing in suspicion.

Running a hand through his hair, The Doctor said airily, "Oh, I'm-I'm dazed and confused. I've been chasing this . . . this wee strange child over hill and over dale. In't that right, ya . . . timorous beastie?"

I gave him a dull look. "While it is true I was forcing you to chase me around the countryside, I will not tolerate being called a timorous beastie, Doctor." A quirk of my mouth told him there was no real menace in the statement.

"Will you identify yourself, sir?" the Captain asked, though it sounded more like a demand.

"I'm Doctor James McCrimmon," The Doctor immediately said. "From the . . . Township of Balamory. Eh . . . I have my credentials, if I may . . ." He gestured to the pocket that held his psychic paper.

The Captain nodded his consent, and The Doctor and I both lowered our arms to our sides. The Doctor pulled out the psychic paper from his pocket and showed it to the Captain. "As you can see, a Doctorate from the University of Edinburgh. I trained under Doctor Bell himself," he explained.
A woman's voice called out from the carriage. "Let them approach."

The Captain frowned, obviously still suspicious. "I don't think that's wise, ma'am."

"Let them approach," the woman commanded.

The Captain made a sour face, frowning at The Doctor when he gestured toward the carriage. Clearing his throat, the Captain said, "You will approach the carriage and show all due deference."

The Doctor gave a silly gesture of acknowledgement before we both approached the carriage. We stopped a respectable distance from the carriage and waited patiently. A footman dutifully opened the carriage door to reveal Queen Victoria herself.

As the Queen studied us both, The Doctor reeled in his awe and shock to begin speaking. "Dahlia, might I introduce her Majesty Queen Victoria. Empress of India and Defender of the Faith."

I smiled and bowed (curtsying wouldn't do much good in a suit). "Dahlia Tombew, ma'am. It's truly an honor and a pleasure to meet you, Your Majesty. I also apologize for my strange state of dress."

Queen Victoria hummed thoughtfully. "Yes, it is quite strange. What decision led you to choose the dress of a man rather than your proper dress, Miss Tombew?"

My mouth quirked up at the corners. "Safety, ma'am, and easier to move, if I have the freedom to add."

Her mouth twitched pleasantly. "Very good, miss. I myself have employed such matters before. It is good to meet another who understands its advantages," she said. Then, she looked to The Doctor. "Now you, Doctor . . . show me these credentials." The Doctor immediately handed her the psychic paper, which she took and examined. "Why didn't you say so immediately? It states clearly here that you have been appointed by the Lord Provost as my protector."

"Does it?" The Doctor asked curiously, peering at the paper himself as he took it back. "Yes, it does! Good! Good! Um . . . then let me ask—why is Your Majesty travelling by road when there's a train all the way to Aberdeen?"

"A tree on the line," she answered simply.

"An accident?" The Doctor questioned.

I snorted. "I doubt it. It would be quite a coincidence for a tree to land on the line right when she's traveling a great distance. Besides, going by train would be expected. It's safer for The Queen to use a different route."

"Quite right, Miss Tombew. I am The Queen of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. Everything around me tends to be planned. A coincidence such as that could not be taken lightly," Queen Victoria said.

"An assassination attempt?" The Doctor asked in surprise.

"I'm quite used to staring down the barrel of a gun," she said, confirming The Doctor's thoughts.

The Captain strode up to the carriage on his horse. "Sir Robert MacLeish lives but ten miles hence. We'll send word ahead; he'll shelter us for tonight. Then we can reach Balmoral tomorrow."
"The Doctor and Miss Tombew will accompany us," The Queen said.

The Captain nodded at her statement. "Yes, ma'am. We'd better get moving—it's almost nightfall."

"Indeed. And there are stories of wolves in these parts. Fanciful tales intended to scare the children, but good for the blood, I think. Drive on!" The Queen ordered.

The Doctor closed the carriage's door, and we stepped back as it continued forward. We waited to bring up the rear of the traveling party.

"Let's see . . . 1879— so, she's had . . . oo . . . six attempts on her life? And I'll tell you something else . . ." he grinned. "We just met Queen Victoria!"

I giggled. "I know! It's so awesome! The magnificent Queen Victoria! I can't believe it!"

Grinning, The Doctor bumped my shoulder with his (or tried to. He was too tall to do it properly). "So," he drawled, "what type of adventures do we get up to on this trip?"

I smirked. "You'll have to wait and find out for yourself, Doctor. I'm not saying anything other than there'll be a lot of running. Oh, and if you think something's off, something is definitely off. Trust your gut."

He pouted. "Aw, that's all? Ya can't tell me a little more? Just a tiny bit?" He held up his fingers that were pinched together so much that there was only a sliver of space between them to emphasis his point.

"Nope," I answered, popping the 'p' and grinning at The Doctor's huffy response. "Don't worry, Doctor. You won't have to wait long for the action to start."

When we approached the Torchwood estate, I took the time to take in the beauty of it. It truly was a marvelous place, though the presence of the bald men standing in front spoiled it.

The carriage stopped, and a different footman from earlier opened the door to assist the Queen's exit.

A fidgety Sir Robert approached The Queen, bowing to her. "Your Majesty."

"Sir Robert. My apologies for the emergency. And how is Lady Isobel?" The Queen greeted.

Sir Robert cleared his throat. "She's . . . indisposed, I'm afraid. She's gone to Edinburgh for the season. And she's taken the cook with her. The kitchens are barely stocked . . . I wouldn't blame Your Majesty if you wanted to ride on," he said, fidgeting with his hands.

The Doctor raised his eyebrows, watching Sir Robert closely. He looked down at me for a hint. I tilted my head toward the bald men and stared intensely at The Doctor. He glanced toward the menacing men and frowned, then gave a slight nod of understanding.

The Queen didn't seem to notice anything amiss, though, and cheerfully replied, "Oh, not at all! I've had quite enough carriage exercise. And this is . . . charming. If rustic. It's my first visit to this house. My late husband spoke of it often. The Torchwood Estate. Now, shall we go inside?" She didn't seem to notice Sir Robert's hesitance. "Oh, and please excuse the girl's strange dress."

Inclining my head toward Sir Robert, I gave a slight shrug as a form of apology and then slapped a hand over The Doctor's mouth to keep him from speaking. When he pouted, I gave him a dull look. "You're not calling me a beastie again. Not if I can help it."
"Shall we proceed?" The Queen asked. Sir Robert nodded his assent and took the lead of the group moving into the house.

The Captain addressed two soldiers, "Makerson and Ramsey, you will escort the Property. Hurry up."

Both soldiers nodded, immediately replying with, "Yes, sir." One of the two took a small wooden box from the carriage and began carrying it into the Torchwood house.

The Doctor eyed the box curiously. "What's in there, then?"

"Property of the Crown," the Captain answered tersely. "You will dismiss any further thoughts, sir."

The Doctor pulled a face but looked down at me for assistance. With a small smile, I raised my eyebrows and nodded ever so slightly. The Doctor beamed back before turning to watch the two soldiers enter the house.

"The rest of you go to the rear of the house. Assume your designated positions," the Captain ordered.

A soldier turned to us, saying, "You heard the orders. Positions, sir."

The Doctor nodded, and we quickly followed the Queen and Sir Robert into the house.

We stayed a few paces behind the group as we all entered the observatory, not crowding the others but close enough to take part in the conversation. I attempted to keep my attention on the bald men but was taken off-guard by the sight of the enormous telescope in the center of the room.

"This, I take it," The Queen said, "is the famous Endeavour."

On television, the structure had been beautiful; in real life, it was more magnificent than I could ever imagine. It completely took my breath away. Soon, I found myself eagerly examining as much of it as I could from my position at The Doctor's side.

Sir Robert nodded in response to the Queen's statement. "All my father's work. Built by hand in his final years. Became something of an obsession—he spent his money on this rather than caring for the house or himself."

The Doctor smiled and pulled his glasses out of his pocket to slip them on his face. "I wish I'd met him, I like him. That thing's beautiful—can we um . . .?" He motioned toward the Endeavour.

"Help yourself."

I followed The Doctor happily, practically skipping to the opposite side The Doctor had taken interest in. I circled it like a buzzard. The work was exceptional, almost completely foreign of Earth. Each separate piece of metal was lovingly crafted into the next; all smooth lines and carefully blunted edges. Oh, what I would give to take it on the TARDIS with us. It would look so perfectly gorgeous in the Cargiterm Maze.

"What did he model it on?" The Doctor asked, leaning back to stare up at its peak.

"I know nothing about it," Sir Robert said. "To be honest, most of us thought him a little . . . shall we say, eccentric." That got a happy laugh out of The Doctor. "I wish now I'd spent more time with him. And listened to his stories," Sir Robert continued, sending a meaningful glance to the Queen.
"It's a bit rubbish," The Doctor blurted out. Sighing, I sent a dull look to him as he looked through the telescope. "How many prisms has it got? Way too many. The magnification's gone right over the top, that's stupid kind of a—" I walked over to him and gently gripped his shoulder. He immediately stopped speaking and turned to me. "Am I being rude again?" I nodded and patted his shoulder. "But it's pretty! It's very . . . pretty."

"Sir Robert," I said, taking my own turn to stare through the spyglass. "Did your father craft each of the pieces himself? Or did he ask another to accomplish the task?" I glanced around the room. "There doesn't seem to be any equipment here . . ."

"He did actually! Some of the bulkier pieces didn't need as much precision. The more delicate sections were commissioned from a metalworker. The equipment my father used has been moved to the room that was supposed to be his workshop. He preferred working right next to the Endeavour, rather than move from room to room," Sir Robert answered.

I ran my hands along the base. "Beautiful piece of work. It's amazing he accomplished such a task."

"And the imagination of it should be applauded," The Queen added. "This device surveys the infinite work of God." She looked at Sir Robert. "What could be finer? Sir Robert's father was an example to us all. A polymath. Steeped in astronomy and sciences, yet equally well versed in folklore and fairytales."

The Doctor smiled at me and took my hand in his, rubbing his thumb along my knuckles. "Stars and magic. I like him more and more." He then moved away to continue to examine the telescope, slowly letting my hand fall from his.

"Oh, my late husband enjoyed his company," The Queen said to me. "Prince Albert himself was acquainted with many rural superstitions, coming as he did from Saxe Coburg."

The Doctor was immediately at my side again, leaning down to whisper "That's Bavaria" in my ear. I shivered when his warm breath flowed over my ear and neck.

"When Albert was told about your local wolf, he was transported," The Queen said, turning back to Sir Robert.

The Doctor turned away from the Endeavour immediately, completely fixating on Sir Robert instead. "So, what's this wolf, then?"

"It's just a story," Sir Robert said. He nervously glanced at the bald men lurking at the edges of the room.

"Then tell it," The Doctor urged eagerly.

Sir Robert swallowed thickly and shifted in placed. Finally, he began speaking in a troubled tone, "It's said that—"

A bald man interrupted him, narrowing his eyes at Sir Robert. "Excuse me, sir. Perhaps her Majesty's party could retire to their rooms. It's almost dark."

"Of course. Yes, of course," Sir Robert breathed out shakily.

"And then supper," The Queen stated. "And . . . could we find some clothes for Miss Tombew? I don't believe caution is needed in this setting. Sir Robert, your wife must've left some clothes. See to it. We shall dine at seven. And talk some more of this wolf. After all . . . there is a full moon tonight."
"So, there is, ma'am," Sir Robert said, bowing as the Queen left the room.

"Right this way, miss," Sir Robert said, motioning for me to follow him down a hallway.

The Doctor stopped in place. A bald man had been about to take him down a different hall. "Right! Mind if I tag along?" he asked cheerfully. "Don't want Dahlia to get nervous in a big place, ya know?"

Sir Robert frowned. "It's quite all right, sir. She'll just be having a quick change and will be down to join us soon."

I watched The Doctor's smile turn strained; he was about to start arguing. Couldn't have that.
"Doctor, it's fine," I said, walking over to him and cupping his cheek. "If I'm late, come find me," I murmured, too low for anyone else to hear. "And be ready to run."

His face tensed when I pulled away. There was a tick in his jaw I pretended to ignore. His eyes were furious with thought and half-started plans, and he kept searching my face for some other clue as to what he should be preparing for, but I didn't give anything away. My expression was loose, at ease, with my mouth curled in the slightest of smiles.

The Doctor finally nodded and pulled away, watching as Sir Robert and I walked down the hall.

Sir Robert left me at a random door; I promised to be down as soon as I could, though he was already leaving and not listening to a word I said.

Oh well, I thought, entering the room. Might as well get this over with.

I didn't bother searching through the other wardrobes. Perhaps if I was quick enough, the maid and I could escape before the bald men came for us.

Flinging open the last wardrobe, I stared down at the cowering maid with a soft expression. "Hey," I whispered. Kneeling down to her level, I continued, "Hey, it's all right. Are you hurt?" She shook her head. Poor thing. She looked like a scared baby animal with her wide eyes and heaving chest. "Come on," I murmured, holding out a hand to her. "Come out of there and tell me what happened. I won't let anything hurt you."

She hesitated for a few minute seconds before gripping my outstretched hand and standing shakily. She still huddled in on herself, eyes darting side to side to examine the room for threats.

"What's your name?" I asked, keeping my voice even and perfectly calm as I steered her toward the bed.

She nearly collapsed onto the bed as she answered. "Flora."

"Flora," I said, settling down beside her. I took her hands in mind and stroked them soothingly. "Tell me what happened."

"They came through the house. The incitements, they took the Steward and the Master. And my Lady," Flora said fearfully, clenching her hands even as I stroked them.

I pursed my lips and leaned in closer to the terrified girl. "Flora, you have to listen to me. I understand that you're scared, but you have to listen." When I had her attention, I spoke again,
"We're going to go downstairs, all right? I have a friend down there who can help. Once we tell him what happened, me and him will take care of it, okay?"

"Oh, but miss, I can't!" Flora interjected, jerking her hands away to fist them in her skirt.

"Yes, you can. I'll be right with you, I promise. I'll protect you. Nothing bad will happen to you if I can help it," I said. "You understand?"

The girl nodded shakily but didn't stand with me.

I held out a hand to her. "Come on. We should hurry."

Finally, Flora took my hand and stood beside me. Her hand felt clammy. I tugged her to the door and opened it, peering outside while Flora huddled close to me.

"Let's go," I whispered, tugging her out of the room and down the hall. Peering around the corner, I immediately saw the guards lying unconscious on the floor.

"Oh, miss, I did warn you!" Flora cried out, cowering close to the wall while I kneeled next to one of the men.

Though I was sure he was just unconscious, I felt his pulse just to be sure. "It's all right, they're just unconscious. We need to hurry. The monks are probably patrolling—" I looked over my shoulder just in time to see one of the monks grab Flora. She attempted to struggle but was easily overpowered.

Another monk appeared and lurched forward to grab me. I dodged and kicked him in the side, knocking him over. Scrambling to stand, I didn't see another monk came up behind me. He wrapped one arm around my waist and clamped the other over my mouth, effectively stopping the scream I was about to let out.

The monks seemed to be taking no chances, because as soon as I began struggling, I was knocked unconscious.

I woke up in chains, surrounded by whimpering maids. Groaning, I sat up and rubbed the back of my head where a knot had formed. "Fuck," I hissed, pulling my head away to inspect it. No blood. That was a relief.

"Don't make a sound," a woman to my left said.

I turned to her. Lady Isobel. Of course. I had almost forgotten she would be down here with us.

"They said if we scream or shout, then he will slaughter us," Lady Isobel continued. She eyed the Host kneeling in the cage fearfully. "He's nothing like us. That creature is not mortal."

The Host raised its head, staring at us with pitch black eyes. Lady Isobel and the household staff cowered closer to the wall; their chains clinked softly with the movement.

Rubbing my eyes to try and stave off the headache that was forming, I stood to better address the Host. Taking a few steps forward, I ignored Lady Isobel when she attempted to grasp at my pant leg, whispering a terrified, "Don't, child."

I dusted my pants off as best as I could and shot Lady Isobel a bored look over my shoulder. "How
'bout a bit of hush for a moment, okay? Let me handle this. You guys just sit there and . . . chill." I waved my hand at them in a gesture that was supposed to be placating but probably came off as apathetic.

"So," I drawled, "are you gonna tell me your name and species, or do I have to guess?"

"Don't enrage him," a man asked, I presumed that he was the groundskeeper or the cook.

I rolled my shoulder to loosen the tightness in them. "You're not from Earth, so where are you from? What planet? Solar system? At least a galaxy? Anything would be helpful at this point."

"Oooh . . . intelligence . . ." the Host cooed. It tilted its head to the side and gave me a calculating smile.

My lips twitched in an attempt to turn into a sneer at the Host's playful tone. "Where are you from?" I demanded. I almost placed my hands on my hips but remembered the chains at the last moment so I crossed them behind my back instead.

The Host's smile turned sickly sweet. "This body . . . ten miles away . . . a weakling, heartsick boy. Stolen away at night by the brethren for my cultivation. I carved out his soul and sat in his heart." Its tongue curled around the words with a reptilian grace that turned its teeth into pearly knives.

I gave the creature a dull look. "I highly doubt even you are capable of that. And I didn't mean the body. I meant the beast inside."

"So far from home," it said, its voice so low it was nearly whispering.

"I know you are. We both are," I replied coldly. "Though . . . I'm not here to take Queen Victoria as a host, unlike you."

The Host's eyes widened in delighted surprise. "Such knowledge!" It moved closer to the bars of the cage, nearly pressing its face against them. Lady Isobel and the household staff let out whimpers at the sudden movement, but I didn't budge. The Host stared at me. "Look! Inside your eyes! You've seen it, too! The Wolf! There is something of the Wolf about you."

I raised an eyebrow and scoffed. "I didn't just see the Wolf. Bad Wolf and I are the same." A wave of fury abruptly overtook me. Charging forward as far as the chains would allow me, I sneered and bared my teeth at the Host. "And if you had seen me, you would've cowered at my feet. I was a god. You're nothing but a lost mutt. Don't compare us."

"You burnt like the sun, but all I require is the moon," the Host near-whispered, craning its head to give a yearning stare out the window at the rising moon.

Enough talking. I whirled around and returned to my original place in the line of prisoners. "All right, everyone, it's time to get out of here!" I said, drawing the attention of the terrified group. "I want all of you to grip a part of the chain and, on my count, pull with as much force as you can! Understood?" That only got a few nods, so I barked, "Understood?!" The rest of the maids nodded, gripping the chain and standing to get better leverage.

The cellar doors flew open, flooding the room with moonlight. The maids shrieked, toppling back towards the wall. The Host let out a soft crooning sound as it pressed its face against the bars of its cage. Its blissful smile made my skin break out in goosebumps.

"Moonlight . . ." the Host said breathily and tossed its cloak away. It briefly spread its arms to enjoy the gust of wind that came through the cellar doors before grasping at the bars again.
"Don't look at it!" I shouted, renewing my grip on the chains. "If you don't want to die, then listen to me!" The maids obeyed, but Lady Isobel hadn't budged. Her stare was completely focused on the Host's transformation. "Lady Isobel! That means you, too! I'm not dying because you want to sit around all day! Now get off your ass and pull!" The terrified woman gave a jerky nod and stood, taking her own section of the chain in hand. "On my count!" I shouted. "One! Two! Pull!" We pulled on the chain, but it didn't move. "Again! Pull!"

I must have moved too quickly because something in my lower chest popped. I doubled over, coughing and gasping for breath. When I managed to open my eyes again, I was watching a cloud of gold dust drift from my mouth and disappear into the air.

That's not good.

But I didn't have time to think about that. I had the obvious problem of the Host transforming mere feet away. So, I shook off the feeling of dread that had overtaken me and renewed my efforts on the chain. "Pull!" I ordered again, thankfully not huffing up anymore gold dust. I could hear the base of the chains creaking. "That's it! Just a little more! Come on!" My arms burned with the effort of the repeated pulling, but I couldn't stop.

"Pull! One! Two! Pull!" The chain pulled free from the wall just when the Host finished its transformation. I nearly collapsed as a dense pain spider-webbed from my sternum outwards, twisting my insides and reaching up to burn through my lungs and upper chest. Flora caught me before I fell, desperately asking if I was all right even while watching the Host flex its claws.

The locked door leading back into the estate suddenly crashed open, and The Doctor came rushing inside the cellar, followed by Sir Robert.

"Get out!" Sir Robert shouted, ushering the maids and his wife out of the room.

Clutching at my aching chest and leaning on Flora for support, I glared at The Doctor. "'Bout time you got here!"

"Dahlia!" he shouted, his face twisted with alarm and worry. He was at my side in a second, taking my weight from Flora so the maid could run from the room. "What's wrong? What's happening? Dahlia, are you—" He cut himself off when he caught sight of the Host in its cage. His mouth fell open and his eyes lit up with wonder and a sort of horrified glee.

"Doctor!" I shouted.

The Doctor immediately came back to his senses and helped me towards the door while the Wolf began tearing apart its cage. We exited the room as quickly as possible. The Doctor soniced the door locked behind us. I leaned against the wall to regain my strength, taking deep breaths as the pain in my chest slowly disappeared.

"Dahlia, are you hurt?" The Doctor asked, hovering closely to me.

Laughing breathlessly, I said, "No, besides, we have bigger things to worry about, Doctor."

The Wolf chose that moment to howl; the sound echoed throughout the house.

"Come on," I said, taking his hand and running down the hall to join the others in the next room.

Panic had set in. The maids were huddled together, helping each other with the chains on their wrists. The men had gathered up any guns they could find and were waiting for orders. Sir Robert and Lady Isobel were embracing and murmuring words of comfort between them. The Doctor
tugged me to one side and used the sonic to remove the shackles on my wrists.

"You sure you're all right? You didn't look so good for a minute there," The Doctor commented, watching me closely even as he worked.

"I'm fine. Just overdid myself a bit, that's all. Nothing to worry about," I replied easily. The pain had gone by now; all that was leftover was the feeling of being a bit short of breath. I cut off The Doctor when he looked like he was about to rebuke that statement. "No arguing. Alien Wolf. Talk.

Beaming at me, The Doctor started rambling a mile a minute, "It could be any form of light modulated species triggered by specific wavelengths—did it say what it wanted?"

The chains clattered to the floor. "Oh, just the usual—it's gonna bite the Queen and take over the British Empire. Same old, same old."

The Doctor didn't get a chance to reply. A banging sound echoed down the corridor from the cellar. The Doctor released my wrists to venture down the hallway to investigate; I followed a few steps behind.

"You know," I said conversationally, "sometimes your unending curiosity comes at the worst of times."

He sent me a sour look over his shoulder, and the Wolf chose that moment to break down the door.

"Shit!" I shouted.

The Doctor and I turned around so quickly we almost slipped on the wooden floor. We charged down the hall and ducked behind the gun line just in time for the men to open fire. The Wolf snarled and whined when the bullets made contact, but I only got a few seconds to look. The smoke from the guns obscured my view as the men fired time and time again. When it finally cleared, the Wolf had disappeared.

Adrenaline made me the first to speak. "Okay, everyone, listen up!" The maids and men startled, their wide eyes snapping to me. "Lady Isobel, take the women to go to the kitchens. It's possible you might be able to get out through there." The Doctor was watching me with a look of pleased surprise, but I decided to ignore him in favor of addressing the group of men who were clutching their guns protectively to their chests. "You all go with them. Protect them if you're able. I won't have any pointless deaths here—"

"We'll be doin' no such thing, Miss," a large man interrupted. "The battle's done. There's no creature on God's Earth that could survive such an assault."

I glared at him. "Well it's not from Earth so—"

"Now I don't know where you're from, girl, but around here such nonsense is severely punished—"


The Doctor stepped forward, wrapped an arm around my shoulders, and frowned at the stubborn fool. "Listen to her! Guns are no good against the Wolf!"

The man sneered back at me and backed away from us, saying, "And I'm telling you, sir, that I will sleep well tonight with that thing's hide upon my wall."
I swiped at the man's jacket when he walked to the hall, but my fingers only skimmed the fabric. The Doctor pulled me back against his chest; I could feel the quick thudding of his hearts.

The man looked down the hallway—barely a second or two—before turning back to us triumphantly. "Must've crawled away to die—"

The Wolf curled down from one of the rafters and grabbed him off the ground. The man had to weigh close to two hundred pounds yet to the Wolf that was nothing. The man's screams bounced off the walls even as the Wolf drug him up into the rafters.

The Doctor drug me away from the scene; I stumbled backwards form the force, trying to keep my eyes on where the Wolf had last been and not fall at the same time. People scrambled around us. Their screams and shouts filled the room with chaos.

"There's nothing we can do!" The Doctor shouted. He pulled me towards the stairs and allowed me to regain my footing. "Do as Dahlia says! Into the kitchen! Sir Robert—"

Sir Robert kissed his wife one last time before shoving her toward the kitchens and nodding. "I'm with you, Doctor."

The Doctor soniced the door shut behind Sir Robert. I stood by him, trying to calm my heart as I thought up a plan; I patted the laser screwdriver in my pocket. I came prepared this time.

"Your Majesty! Your Majesty!" Sir Robert called out in the direction of the stairs, gripping the banister tightly.

The Queen quickly made her way down the stairs. "Sir Robert! What's happening? I heard such terrible noises."

The Doctor briefly clasped my shoulder before moving away to inspect another hallway. I stayed by the door to listen for the Wolf and watch the Queen.

Sir Robert stared guiltily at the Queen. "Your Majesty—we've got to get out. But what of Father Angelo? Is he still here?"

Queen Victoria tensed, and I watched her look away briefly before regaining her composure. "Captain Reynolds disposed of him," she finally answered.

The Doctor returned, automatically slipping his hand into mine and gesturing to a door with the free hand. "The front door's no good, it's been boarded shut. Pardon me, Your Majesty—you'll have to leg it out of a window."

The Queen, with her head held high, turned and regally strode through the doorway. I followed closely, tugging The Doctor behind me, with Sir Robert bringing up the rear. When we came to the door, Sir Robert went to the front of our group.

"Excuse my manners, ma'am, but I shall go first, the better to assist Her Majesty's egress," he said with a slight downward inclination of his head.

The Queen nodded her agreement. "A noble sentiment, my Sir Walter Raleigh."

I rolled my eyes, and The Doctor grunted in annoyance. "Yeah, any chance you could hurry up?"
he added impatiently, briefly looking over his shoulder in case we had been followed.

Sir Robert didn't hesitate any longer. He opened the window and attempted to climb out but quickly scrambled back inside when the monks outside began firing at us. We ducked down behind the wooden ledge beneath the window.

When the shots stopped, The Doctor leaned towards the window to peer outside. "I reckon the monkey boys want us to stay inside."

"Do they know who I am?" The Queen demanded angrily from where we were crouched against the wall.

"Oh yeah, they definitely do," I piped up. "The Wolf wants you inside, so it can bite you."

The Queen turned to me with an annoyed look. She scoffed, "Now, stop this talk. There can't be an actual wolf."

Right on cue, the Wolf’s howl echoed throughout the entire house. We darted out of our crouched positions and ran back to the other room.

"So," I said, "we can't go out through the window. The cellar's a no-go. What's left?"

"We run," The Doctor said simply. He turned to the Queen and demonstrated by running in place. "Your Majesty, as a Doctor, I recommend a vigorous jog. Good for the health. Come on!" He grabbed her hand and lead her up the stairs. Sir Robert and I followed close behind. Our footsteps thudded against the wooden staircase like a stampede of animals.

The stairs came too soon for me. I found that out as my chest seized up on one deep breath. A coughing fit nearly caused me to stumble, but Sir Robert was quick to catch me. He helped me regain my footing without either of us stopping.

At the top of the stairs, we kept running. The Wolf was right behind us. I could hear the clack of its claws on the floor and smell its hot, wet breath. The corridors seemed to go on forever, and the weakness in my chest had begun to leach down into my legs.

*Keep going, keep going. You can't slow down. It's right behind you,* I thought desperately but even my thoughts were gasping. *Where's Captain Reynolds? He's supposed to be—*

Sir Robert had just rounded the next corner when Captain Reynolds appeared, gun readied. But something was wrong. His eyes were wide, and he kept moving the gun . . .

The Wolf was too close. He couldn't get a shot in without hitting me.

A burst of speed came from nowhere. I moved forward just in time to feel the Wolf's claws skim my back.

Captain Reynolds fired. I heard the Wolf shriek as the bullets connected but couldn't find it in myself to pay any attention. I was too busy trying to *stop.* The wall helped with that problem.

I hadn't managed to stop, but I had managed to turn just enough so that my shoulder hit the wall instead of my hands or face. Hissing in pain and gasping to regain my breath, I slid down to the floor with a hand clutching my chest.

"Dahlia!" The Doctor shouted, rushing to kneel at my side. The sonic screwdriver whirred to life as he scanned me. "Are you hurt? Please, please, be all right, oh, Dahlia, please—"
"Doctor," I gasped. "Doctor, just, just let me breathe. I . . . need a . . . second . . . that's all . . ."

"It didn't hurt you, did it?" he asked softly, backing off just enough to give me some air.

I shook my head weakly. "No. No, it just skimmed."

He gave me a strained smile and pressed a kiss to my temple. "Good . . . that's . . . good."

Captain Reynolds returned, carefully reloading his gun as he spoke. "I'll take this position and hold it. You keep moving, for God's sake! Your Majesty—I went to look for the property, it was taken. The chest was empty."

Holding a hand to her chest, Queen Victoria replied, "I have it. It's safe."

"Then remove yourself, ma'am. Doctor, you stand as Her Majesty's Protector. And you, Sir Robert—you're a traitor to the crown," Captain Reynolds said, cocking his gun.

"Shut up," I spat, reaching out to The Doctor so he could help me up. I wasn't gasping anymore, and the weakness in my chest and legs had nearly vanished. The sudden chest pains had disappeared, as well. I didn't know why I wasn't feeling any aftershocks, but I wasn't about to question it.

"Excuse me, miss?" Reynolds demanded. He quickly glanced away from the corridor to look at me.

"We aren't leaving you here. Bullets won't stop it. All you'll be doing is giving it something else to chew on," I said, shoving away from the wall.

"Then I will die in service to Her Majesty!"

I rolled me eyes. "Too fucking bad. Go with them. I'll stay."

"What?!" The Doctor, Sir Robert, and Captain Reynolds shouted.

The Doctor gripped me tightly by the shoulders. "Dahlia, I don't know what's gotten into your head, but I'm not leaving you here!" he said furiously.

"You're not leaving me behind! I'm staying to slow down the Wolf!"

"You were just gasping for breath a few seconds ago!" Captain Reynolds interjected.

Throwing him a dull look over The Doctor's shoulder, I replied, "Exactly. And what does that say about your chances? Besides, I have a plan."

"Dahlia," The Doctor said desperately, forcing my attention back to him. "Don't make me leave you here. Please. I . . . I can't do it."

Smiling brightly, I cradled The Doctor's face in my hands and placed a brief kiss on his mouth. "You're not leaving me. I'm staying."

I pulled out of his grip and moved to where Captain Reynolds was standing, keeping eye contact. "Keep the door open for me, okay?" He swallowed thickly before nodding. "Good, now go!"

The Wolf had regained its strength and was carefully moving down the corridor towards us. Captain Reynolds, The Queen, and Sir Robert took off; however, The Doctor lingered. The agony on his face caused my gut to twist, but I refused to cave.
"Go!" I ordered again, readying my hand to slip into my pocket for the laser screwdriver.

He finally nodded and rushed to join the others.

The laser was in my hand and readied the second he wasn't looking.

Pressing myself against the wall, I took a deep breath to steel my nerves. "Setting eleven," I murmured. The laser clicked as a reply. "Okay, then. No need to keep The Doctor waiting."

The Wolf was only a few feet away. I could hear it breathing.

Just a bit closer. My thumb rolled over the laser's trigger. Just a bit . . . Now!

I twisted around the corner, the arm with the laser outstretched. The Wolf snarled at me; I forced myself not to move. The Wolf leaped towards me, and I fired. A molten hot beam of energy skimmed the Wolf's chest and underbelly and connected with one of its hind legs.

The Wolf howled in agony and twisted itself midair to get out of the laser's path. I lunged in the opposite direction as the Wolf crashed into the corner of the hallway. The laser clattered out of my grip, briefly singeing the ceiling and walls before dying out. The Wolf shrieked and whined in pain. As it twisted in on itself, I scrambled to my feet and rushed to where the laser screwdriver had landed.

The Wolf was still rolling around in agony. I could end this now.

Readying the laser, I turned around.

"Dahlia!"

I jerked and look over my shoulder. The Doctor was standing outside the library; his face was a mixture of shock and horror.

"For fuck's safe!" I hissed, shoving the laser in my pocket and running towards the library while the Wolf continued to fumble on the floor. I nearly slammed right into The Doctor's chest, but he caught me and used my momentum to lift me off the ground and physically carry me inside the library.

Sir Robert and Captain Reynolds slammed the doors shut. The Doctor briefly left my side to help the other two men barricade the doors with any furniture they could find. The men suddenly pulled away from the doors; however, The Doctor hovered closer than the other two dared.

"Wait a minute, shh, shh, wait a minute . . ." he whispered, holding up a hand to hush us. He silently maneuvered over the furniture to press his head against the door. "It's stopped." He climbed on a chair to get a better position and began listening again. "It's gone," he informed us, turning around.

But we could still hear the Wolf padding around the room.

Clutching a hand to my chest to steady my breaths, I breathed, "The other doors . . ."

Sir Robert was the first to move, quickly followed by The Doctor and Captain Reynolds. They barricaded the doors and scrambled away to listen as the Wolf sniffed on the other side of the doors. After several long and tense moments, the Wolf slowly padded away, a noticeable limp in its step.
Captain Reynolds frowned and slowly stepped closer to the center of the room. "What could possibly stop the wolf from getting in?" he looked around as he spoke.

"Something inside this room," The Doctor replied. He, too, gave every detail of the room a hard stare, even as he returned to my side.

Sir Robert silently collapsed into a chair, cradling his face in his hands.

"What is it?" The Doctor asked in confusion. "Why can't it get in?"

He looked at me for an answer, but I didn't give him one. I simply shrugged, or I attempted to. I had been swept into an almost suffocating hug by The Doctor.

"I thought I was going to lose you," he confessed from where his face was buried in my hair. A breath of air wheezed out of my lungs as I chuckled. I returned the hug with an acknowledging hum. "Oh please, like something as simple as an alien werewolf would be able to take me out."

"I was so scared, Dahlia, so so scared," he continued. He pulled away to look me in the eyes. "Please, please don't ever do something like that again. I don't think I could ever move on if I lost you. Please? For me?"

My heart clenched. *Don't think about it. Don't think about it.* "Doctor, I can't promise you that, and you know it." He gave me the most pitiful stare. "Just like you can't promise me you won't do something exactly like what I just did. It's not how we live, and it would be wrong to ask us to make promises we can't keep." I cradled his face, so he would look me in the eye again instead of staring at the ground. "But we can promise to not take risks we aren't sure of. Okay?"

He smiled. "That's enough for me."

I smiled back and pecked him on the lips. "Me, too."

"I'm sorry, ma'am," Sir Robert spoke up. The Doctor and I pulled out of our embrace (finally remembering that that sort of intimacy wasn't allowed for unmarried couples). Sir Robert drug his hands away from his face as he met The Queen's stare. "It's all my fault. I should've sent you away. I tried to suggest something was wrong, I . . . thought you might notice. Did you think there was nothing strange about my household staff?"

The Doctor shrugged, saying, "Well, they were bald, athletic . . . your wife's away, I just thought you were happy."

Huffing, I rolled my eyes at the joke, though my mouth did twitch in amusement (against my better judgement).

"Do you think this is funny?" Queen Victoria snapped at us. The Doctor visibly winced, and I cringed at her disapproving tone. She continued, spitting out an almost order, "What, exactly, I pray someone please—what exactly is that creature?"

Scratching his head, The Doctor awkwardly answered, "You'd call it a werewolf, but technically it's a more of a lupine wavelength haemovariform . . ."

*Wow, what a crystal-clear description,* I thought dully, nearly giving into the urge to snort when he finished talking.

"And should I trust you, sir?" The Queen asked sharply. "You who change your voice so easily?"
What happened to your accent?"

The Doctor fumbled for a second as he processed what The Queen had just said. "Oh . . . right, sorry—"

"And you, Miss Tombew—" I snapped to attention when Her Majesty addressed me, looking at her with wide, shocked eyes. "What House do you hail from?"

Furrowing my brows and frowning, I said, "Um, no House, ma'am, I'm not a noble."

"I shall not hear any lies!" The Queen glared at me. "Do not take me for a fool, Miss Tombew. Your actions give you away. You give orders to men and expect those orders to be followed. You hold yourself with a dignity and grace afforded to only those who have been raised in the upper-class. Why, if I was a more dimwitted woman I would mistake you for one of my court! Come on, out with it! What House? Howard? Spencer-Churchill? Lennox? Rumor has it that one of their daughters has recently, shall we say, eloped with a rather eccentric scoundrel." She eyed The Doctor with satisfaction as his mouth slowly dropped open before looking back to me where I was struggling to breathe. "Seeing as you're here—in Scotland—I can safely assume that this is correct? Though I don't see a ring of any kind . . ."

I finally managed to gather enough breath to speak. "Your Majesty, I apologize if any of my actions have made you . . . perceive me as nobility—and as flattering as that is—it isn't true. I'm not a noble, and The Doctor and I haven't eloped—"

"I dunno," The Doctor piped up quietly from behind me. "Jackie thought I had certainly swept you off after those first few adventures . . ."

Whirling around, I smacked his arm and hissed, "You are not helping!"

He raised his hands in a placating manner, pouting after closing his mouth. Huffing, I turned back to the Queen, who look ever so slightly amused.

"Ma'am, I apologize again . . ."

"No matter," she interrupted. "Though I must ask . . . why would a young woman of your caliber choose a life such as this?"

"Choose?" I echoed slowly. I licked my lips as I thought of how to respond. "I . . . this sort of life . . . it's rare that one gets to choose whether or not they're a part of this sort of life. I didn't . . . choose this, at first that is . . . it kind of crashed into my life and drug me in kicking and screaming? And then I chose it."

The Queen scoffed, her face steeling immediately. "I'll not have it. Not you or The Doctor . . . not that thing . . . none of it. This is not my world."

My eyebrows shot upwards as far as they could go. "Sorry to disappoint you, Your Majesty, but . . . you don't get much of a choice. Once this life chooses you, you have to accept it. At least to a certain degree."

"Oh? And why should I bend to your rules?"

A slightly delirious giggle burst out of me. "Maybe because a werewolf is trying to bite you and make you its Host?"

The Queen looked like she wanted to reply to that statement, but The Doctor spoke up first.
He had perched himself on one of the chairs barricading the first set of doors. "Mistletoe . . ." he muttered, tracing one of the carvings on the door. "Sir Robert, did your father put that there?"

Sir Robert shrugged and said, "I don't know . . . I suppose . . ."

The Doctor frowned and leaned closer to the carving. He glanced at me briefly as I walked over to his roost before looking back at the carving and saying, "On the other door, too . . . a carving wouldn't be enough . . . I wonder . . ." He licked the carving.

I grimaced. "Why do you have to lick everything?" I said in disgust.

With a sudden glee, The Doctor looked down at me, wiggling his eyebrows and catching his tongue between his teeth coquettishly. Gaping, I flushed in embarrassment at both his bold flirtation and the heat that had spread through my body because of the act. I turned away from The Doctor, choosing to face the wall rather than his suddenly lustful gaze, and crossed my arms over my chest. I tried to fight the burning heat in my cheeks but only succeeded in forcing it to coil much lower.

"Viscum album, the oil of the mistletoe—it's been worked into the wood like a varnish! How clever was your dad? I love him," The Doctor continued, his grin widening. "Powerful stuff, mistletoe. Bursting with lectins and viscotoxins."

"And how exactly does that help us?" Captain Reynolds asked.

"The Wolf's allergic to it," I answered, looking over my shoulder at him. Then I shrugged. "At least it thinks it is."

The Doctor nodded in agreement. "The monkey monk monks need a way of controlling the wolf, maybe they trained it to react against certain things."

"Nevertheless," Sir Robert interjected, "that creature won't give up, Doctor, and we still don't possess an actual weapon."

The Doctor smiled widely. "Oh, your father got all the brains, didn't he?"

"Rude," I admonished.

He nodded satisfactorily. "Good, I meant that one," he said, walking over to a set of bookshelves. "You want weapons? We're in a library. Books! Best weapons in the world." He took out those glasses he didn't need and put them on. "This room's the greatest arsenal we could have." He pulled a book off the shelf and tossed it to me. Fumbling, I caught it and sent him a sour look. "Arm yourself," The Doctor finished.

The Doctor, Sir Robert, and Captain Reynolds immediately swarmed the bookshelves, flipping through books so fast I wasn't even sure that they were comprehending what they were reading. I stood slightly off to the side, watching with a disconnected fascination. I was supposedly "helping", but the men wouldn't move out of the way, so I could scour the shelves myself. When I had attempted to remove The Doctor from his newest perch on a ladder in front of the shelves, he had merely tossed me a random book without even looking at the cover.

I caught the book, scoffing immediately when I read the title—*Terrance Hill's Guide to Economics*. Like that would be useful. I dropped the book on the closest table and returned to
hovering by the men.

"If you all would just move, I could probably find what we're looking for in minimum time," I offered and was, of course, ignored.

The men spoke erratically. They swapped theories and phrases in such a high quantity that their words blurred together into an undiscernible jumble.

Huffing, I put my hands on my hips and glared up at The Doctor, who had just tossed away a book to pick up another. He ignored my glare. Instead, he focused on flipping through the book until something caught his eye. He jumped down from the ladder and walked over to the table, setting the book down after shoving mine out of the way.

"Look what your old dad found. Something fell to Earth," he said. His left hand was braced on the table while his right hand pointed to the illustration of an object falling to Earth from the sky.

I squirmed under The Doctor left arm to get a good look at the picture. Captain Reynolds and Sir Robert crowded around his right side. "Most likely a ship," I said, though the illustration didn't help with identifying the object; it looked like a giant rock.

"A shooting star," Sir Robert attempted to correct me. I gave him a dull look as he read the description on the opposite page. "'In the year of our Lord, 1540, under the reign of King James the Fifth, an almighty fire did burn in the pit.' That's the Glen of Saint Catherine just by the Monastery."

"But that would be three hundred years ago. Why wait so long?" Captain Reynolds questioned, frowning at the book.

I traced the illustration with a finger. "Most likely only a single cell survived, or at the very least very few. It needed to grow, adapt. That's why it's been using humans. It needs a Host to survive."

"But why does it want the throne?" Sir Robert asked.

Giving him an unimpressed look, I said, "That's a bit obvious. The British Empire is the most powerful force in the world at this point in time. The supremacy of its navy and armies hasn't been rivaled by any other country. It completely dominates world trade and effectively controls many countries' economies. All the Wolf has to do is bite the Queen, and she's a Host. Job done. Why wouldn't the Wolf want the throne?"

"Imagine it . . ." The Doctor muttered. "The Victorian Age accelerated . . . starships and missiles fueled by coal and driven by steam . . . leaving history devastated in its wake . . ."

"Sir Robert! Captain Reynolds!" The Queen's outburst caused us all to look up. She stood from where she had previously been sitting on the other side of the room. The summoned men immediately rushed to answer the Queen's call.

The Doctor looked down at me and snorted. I muffled my giggle behind my hand.

"If I am to die here . . ." The Queen continued.

"Don't say that, Your Majesty!" "Your Majesty, please . . !" Sir Robert and Captain Reynolds rushed to speak at the same time.

The Queen held her head high, stating simply, "I would destroy myself rather than let that creature infect me. But that's no matter. I ask only that you find some place of safekeeping for something
far older and more precious than myself." She opened her bag and reached inside.

The Doctor rolled his eyes again. "Hardly the time to worry about your valuables," he huffed.

The Queen regarded him stiffly. "Thank you for your opinion. But there is nothing more valuable than this," she said, pulling a large, glistening diamond out of her bag.

The Doctor inhaled sharply and said, "That's the Koh-I-Noor. The greatest diamond in the world." He took my hand and led me closer to The Queen for a better look.

"Given to me as the spoils of war," The Queen explained proudly. "Perhaps its legend is now coming true. It is said that whoever owns it must surely die."

The Doctor shrugged dismissively. "Well, that's true of anything if you own it long enough. Can I . . . ?" He held out his hand to take the gem. Queen Victoria hesitated for a moment but handed the diamond over. Sliding his glasses down his nose, he peered at the diamond. "It's so beautiful."

"If you're into diamonds," I said, standing on my toes to inspect the diamond.

"Oh?" The Doctor asked. He gave me a curious look.

The Queen smiled. "You sound like my youngest daughter. She believes diamonds are boring and plain. Refuses to wear them. She prefers garnets. What about you?"

I smiled back. "Opals are my favorite."

Still twirling the diamond in the light, The Doctor said, "I'll have to keep that in mind."

I rolled my eyes and asked, "How much is it worth exactly?"

"They say . . . the wages of the entire planet for a whole week," The Doctor answered.

I hummed softly. "What century? This one? Or does it account for inflation?"

"Where is the Wolf?" Sir Robert suddenly asked. He glanced around the room.

"Yes, I don't trust this silence," Captain Reynolds agreed. The two men wandered off, assumedly to inspect the rest of the room.

The Doctor either hadn't heard either of them or was ignoring them. "Why do you travel with it?"

"My annual pilgrimage," Queen Victoria clarified. "I'm taking it to Helier and Carew, the Royal Jewellers at Hazelhead. The stone needs re-cutting."

"I don't see why. It looks good to me," I said.

With a sad smile, The Queen replied, "My late husband never thought so."

The Doctor removed his glasses and looked at me. "Now, there's a fact—Prince Albert kept on having the Koh-I-Noor cut down. It used to be forty percent bigger than this. But he was never happy. Kept on cutting and cutting." He gave the diamond another fascinated stare.

I watched The Queen's expression become far away, like part of her wasn't in the present anymore. "He always said . . ." she added quietly, "the shine was not quite right. But he died with it still unfinished."
"Unfinished . . ." The Doctor echoed. His eyes widened as the realization dawned on him. "Oh, yes!" He tossed the Koh-I-Noor back to Queen Victoria, who was startled by the action but caught the diamond anyway. The Doctor began speaking quickly, a fire in his eyes. "There's a lot of unfinished business in this house. His father's research—your husband, ma'am, he came here, and he sought the perfect diamond—hold on, hold on—" He roughly ran his fingers through his hair. I admired the wild shape it took as The Doctor continued speaking. "All these separate things, they're not separate at all, they're connected! Oh, my head, my head! What if—this house, it's a trap for you—is that right, ma'am?"

"Obviously," she agreed.

The Doctor practically bounced place. "At least, that's what the wolf intended. But! What if there's a trap inside the trap?"

The Queen was obviously confused, but I was grinning. The Doctor's energy was wearing off on me, and I couldn't help but vibrate with the need to spout out everything I knew. Luckily, the Queen was already staring The Doctor down, demanding answers. "Explain yourself, Doctor."

"What if his father and your husband weren't just telling each other stories. They dared to imagine all this was true. And they planned against it. Laying the real trap not for you . . . but for the wolf." The Doctor stopped speaking when a dusting of plaster fell from the ceiling. We all looked upwards in horror. The Wolf walked across the glass dome, snarling at us. "That Wolf there . . ." The Doctor muttered.

The glass cracked under the Wolf's weight.

"Out! Out! Out!" The Doctor shouted.

We all rushed to the closet set of doors and began shoving the makeshift barricade out of the way. The Wolf crashed through the glass and into the room right when we ran from the room. The Doctor was the last out, locking the door behind him.

Our group continued running; not even faltering when the library doors were smashed open. The Doctor refused to release my hand, even when it was highly probable that I would run faster without him tugging me along. The pain in my chest was gone, and my breathing was even. There wasn't any reason I shouldn't be able to keep up now.

At least for now.

The Wolf was close but not as close as it could've been. I could hear its heaving breathes and claws clicking on the wooden floor, but there was a noticeable limp in its stride. I let myself have a moment of victory.

"Gotta get to the observatory!" The Doctor said when we rounded the corner.

Lady Isobel seemed to come out of nowhere. Brandishing a full pot of water, she waited until I was out of the way to toss the water on the incoming Wolf. The Wolf let out a startled howl and immediately retreated down the hall.

"Good shot!" The Doctor shouted.

"It was mistletoe!" Lady Isobel said with an unsteady smile.

The Doctor wandered over to the corner to search for any sign of the Wolf. Without letting go of my hand. So, I was pulled along, though I mainly paid attention to the reunion between Lady Isobel
and Sir Robert.

"Isobel!" Sir Robert cried out, rushing forward to envelope her in a hug. They shared a kiss before he pulled away from her. "Get back downstairs."

"Keep yourself safe," she pleaded to him.

They kissed again before parting. Lady Isobel turned to the other girls who had come with her.

"Girls, come with me. Down the back stairs, back to the kitchen. Quickly!" she said, gathering up her skirt in her hands and leaving after giving her husband a lingering stare.

My gut turned sourly at the thought of this being the last time they see each other. My expression hardened. Not if I can help it.

The Doctor took my hand again. "Come on!" he said. And our group was off again.

"The observatory's this way!" Sir Robert shouted, moving to the front of the group to lead the way.

One more dash up a spiral staircase and down a hallway and we were at the observatory. The Doctor was through the doors first which meant I was obviously right behind him. Then, The Queen who was followed by Captain Reynolds and Sir Robert.

"No mistletoe on these doors, your father wanted the wolf to get inside!" The Doctor exclaimed, releasing my hand. "Get inside! I just need time! Is there any way of barricading this?" He spun as he searched the room for something movable but heavy enough to block the doors.

"Just do your work, and I'll defend it," Sir Robert said, moving into the doorway.

The Doctor continued to flit around the room, not hearing Sir Robert. "If we could bind them shut with rope or something!"

Clenching his jaw and standing tall, Sir Robert repeated, "I said I'd find you time, sir. Now get inside."

The Queen and Captain Reynolds gaped at the man. They obviously hadn't excepted such bravery from a "traitor to The Crown."

I huffed and marched up to the fool. "Like hell you are! Move, I'll do it." I would keep the doors open but move farther down the hall. That way I could get a clean shot at the Wolf but also had somewhere to go if something went wrong.

"No, Miss!" Sir Robert objected. He attempted to block my exit, giving me a desperate stare.

"Oh, don't argue with me!" I scoffed. "Captain Reynolds tried to argue with me, and you saw where that got him. Now, let me handle this." I moved around him and reached for my pocket. This time I won't miss.

Sir Robert caught my arm, stopping me in the doorway. Sighing in irritation, I turned to look at him but froze when I met his eyes.

They were glassed over and faded, as if Sir Robert wasn't the one interacting with me anymore.

"Sir Robert?" I asked cautiously.

"You have done so much today . . ." he murmured. His voice was different, too; it was lighter,
softer, and had an almost wispy quality to it. "Many people are alive because of you. I appreciate all that you've done, but I cannot be saved." He clasped my hand between both of his. "We cannot deny The Wolf's call. My death was sealed long ago." With a smile, the strangeness faded from his expression. He released my hand and looked over my shoulder.

Long arms wrapped around my waist. "Good man," The Doctor said sincerely, right before lifting me off the ground and further into the observatory. Away from the doors. Away from Sir Robert. Sir Robert gave me another smile right before closing the doors.

After setting me down, The Doctor ran over to the Queen. "Your Majesty, the diamond," he said, holding his hand out.

"For what purpose?" she demanded.

"The purpose it was designed for," he answered.

The Queen didn't take long to consider what The Doctor said. She handed over the diamond without comment. Tensely, Captain Reynolds left her side to stand in front of the doors with his pistol drawn.

The Doctor rushed back to the telescope, calling out to me, "Dahlia!"

I jolted out of my daze. "Right! We—we have to . . . to get the prisms into the right position." I half stumbled over to the mechanism needed to activate the telescope. Taking hold of one of the grips on the wheel, I began pushing upwards as The Doctor pulled downwards on the other side. We hadn't been working for long when we heard the Wolf's snarls from the hall. We heard Sir Robert's muffled voice through the doors, and though the words were unclear, I knew what he said. My stomach roiled when the Wolf roared.

Sir Robert's screams made me redouble my efforts.

I allowed myself a brief look over my shoulder. Captain Reynolds stood tall in front of the doors. His hands were barely quivering. The Queen had stepped closer to the center of the room and was holding the cross around her neck up high. I thought she would begin praying. Instead, she spoke, her voice quivering.

"Doctor! You said the device wouldn't work!"

"It doesn't work as a telescope because that's not what it is! It's a light chamber! It magnifies the light rays like a weapon. We've just got to power it up!" he shouted, grunting with the effort of forcing the cogs and gears to move.

"It weaponizes the moonlight against the Wolf!" I further explained.

"You're seventy percent water, but you can still drown. Come on!" he barked. Light started to filter through. "Come on!"

The scope finally slid into position. Moonlight reflected off the prisms and powered up the machine. The light concentrated until it lit up the floor just under the end of the telescope.

The Wolf crashed through the doors. Captain Reynolds fired off several shots, but the bullets did nothing. The Wolf easily tossed him aside; he crashed into the wall and slid limply to the floor. The Wolf stalked towards the Queen on its hind legs, teeth bared.
The Doctor lunged, tossing the Koh-I-Noor into the beam of light; the diamond reflected the light immediately. The beam of light hit the Wolf’s chest and forced it into the air. The Wolf hung there for several before being forced back into the Host's human form.

The man looked down at The Doctor. "Make it brighter. Let me go," he begged softly.

The Doctor's eyes fell, his demeanor turning sorrowful, but he still walked over to the telescope and flipped the switch that would brighten the light.

As the light intensified, the Wolf howled one last time before fading out of existence and taking the moonlight with it.

And just like that, the tension in the room released. The Queen looked like she was about to collapse. She cradled her hand to her chest. The Doctor rushed over to where Captain Reynolds was still unconscious, examining him with his sonic screwdriver.

The soft whirring sound of the sonic comforted me. I scooped up the Koh-I-Noor and hovered a few feet behind the Queen. "Your Majesty?" I questioned. "Did it bite you?"

She shook her head, her eyes still completely focused on the cut. "No, it's . . . it's a cut."

"Ma'am? Are you sure?" I shuffled slightly closer to her.

The Doctor stood from his crouched position. "Captain Reynolds will be fine after several hours of rest. I would prefer to move him to a bed, but he's all right for now," he said, walking over to rejoin us. "Now, what's this talk about a cut?"

Queen Victoria smiled and said serenely, "That's all it is, just a cut."

"If that thing bit you . . ." The Doctor continued in a deeper, more serious tone.

She cut him off, "It was a splinter of wood when the door came apart."

The Doctor's eyes narrowed suspiciously, and he held out his hand for her own. "Let me see."

She pulled her hand even closer to her chest to hide it from his view. "It is nothing."

Still very much suspicious, The Doctor let the Queen be; instead, he transferred his concern onto me.

I let him fuss over me. There was no harm in it, and if the action made him feel better, then why not indulge him? He scanned me with the sonic, muttering to himself about stubborn monarchs and rolling his eyes. I smiled at the familiarity of his actions.

This was a better day I expected.

When morning came, everyone still alive—which was most of them, I was proud to note—crowded into a large sitting room. The Doctor and I kneeled in front of Queen Victoria, who held a shining sword in her hands.

I was jittery with nervous excitement. Even though I knew we would be banished as soon as we were knighted, I could barely contain my enthusiasm. We're about to be knighted! By Queen Victoria! Oh my God I'm gonna throw up!
The Doctor responded to my anxious energy by sending me a wide smile and a wink before composing himself again (or attempting to). I was just trying to keep the vomit in my stomach.

"By the power invested in me by the Church and the State, I dub thee: Sir Doctor of TARDIS," The Queen said, touching the sword to his right shoulder and then to his left. My heart lurched when she looked at me. She repeated the action with me, reciting, "By the power invested in me by the Church and the State, I dub thee: Dame Dahlia of TARDIS." When I had told the Queen that my home was the TARDIS, this ridiculously dopey grin had overcome The Doctor's face. I had made sure to memorize the image; I never wanted to forget it.

We stood when the Queen allowed us to. "Many thanks, ma'am," The Doctor said.

I nodded and smiled. "It's truly an honor, ma'am."

"Your Majesty, you said last night about receiving a message from the great beyond—I think your husband cut that diamond to save your life. He's protecting you even now ma'am, even from beyond the grave," The Doctor added with beaming grin.

"Indeed," The Queen said. "Then you may think on this, also: that I am not amused." I raised my eyebrows in surprise. That was a surprise. I had never expected her to say it without Rose's pestering. "Not remotely amused," she continued. Here it comes. "And henceforth . . . I banish you."

The Doctor was taken aback, but I ducked my head down to hide my growing smile, though a few giggles still managed to slip out.

"I'm sorry . . .?" The Doctor asked, his face screwing up in confusion.

With barely controlled fury, Queen Victoria spoke, "I rewarded you, Sir Doctor. And now you are exiled from this empire, never to return. I don't know what you are, the two of you, or where you're from, but I know that you consort with stars—and magic—and think it fun. But your world is steeped in terror and blasphemy and death, and I will not allow it! You will leave these shores, and you will reflect, I hope, on how you managed to stray so far from all that is good. And how much longer you will survive this . . . terrible life." She stepped back, away from us, and commanded, "Now leave my world. And never return."

The Doctor helped me off the back of the farmer's cart when it stopped. "Cheers, Dougal!" he called to the farmer. Entwining his fingers with mine, The Doctor continued what he had been saying, "You know, the funny thing is, Queen Victoria did actually suffer a mutation of the blood! It's historical record haemophiliac. It used to be called the Royal Disease! But it's always been a mystery because she didn't inherit it. Her mum didn't have it. Her dad didn't have it—it came from nowhere!" I giggled at his enthusiasm, pulling his attention away from his thoughts. "And you knew the entire time! Oh . . ." he paused and frowned. "I'm sorry about Sir Robert. I know you wanted to save him."

I tucked myself into his side. "No, no, it's all right. Sir Robert made the choice to sacrifice himself. I won't be bitter about it, especially since nearly everyone lived anyway."

He kissed the top of my head and smiled. "That's my girl. Don't let it get you down. You did so much good back there . . . even though I was sure you were trying to send me into cardiac arrest."

"Oh, shut up," I scoffed. I smacked his chest just for good measure.
The Doctor's expression froze for a second. I started to ask what was wrong, but The Doctor swept me up into a fierce kiss. He pulled away after kissing me breathless; a cocky smirk pulled at the corners of his mouth.

"I just remember," he purred, leaning in close to me, "we never got to finish our little . . . activity yesterday morning."

I burst out into giggles and darted away from him. "Then you'll have to catch me!"

He began chasing me immediately, laughing along with me, even when I slipped just out of the way of his grasping hands and into the TARDIS.

Oh yes, today had been a good day.
Rest Day

Chapter Notes

Okay, so this is the last chapter of the main story I needed to transfer over. I still need to transfer Takeaways: DW, but I might let that wait until I finish writing the new chapter, I dunno yet.

Today was a rest day. No adventures or trips outside of the TARDIS, just me and The Doctor hanging out in the Time Vortex. Apparently, my sudden streak of risk taking had made The Doctor anxious enough to warrant a bit of time off. He said I needed to give his hearts a rest or else they would give out sooner rather than later. I had mocked his short, overdramatic speech. He had paced and wagged his fingers like I was the most irresponsible of the two of us.

I had agreed to the break but only partially to spare The Doctor some stress. Adventuring day after day was tiring, and a pause from the excitement would do us both some good. And I, unlike The Doctor, more than appreciated the short bouts of peace onboard the TARDIS in between escapades.

Plus, I had a few things to get done on the TARDIS. Specifically, contacting Ashley. I had been texting a lot between her and Mickey (and sometimes Jackie), but I hadn’t had time to call her up for the lesson I had promised her. I wanted to know how far she had gotten in the books I had given her before The Doctor and I last departed Earth. I had specifically picked out the least technical and most interesting books the TARDIS library contained to cover the basics; hopefully, it was enough to at least get her started. Her questions would most likely be rudimentary. At least, I was hoping they would be. I would mostly be relying on my own knowledge of space and time travel, though I had bookmarked several helpful tomes—with color-coded sticky notes no less—from the library to assist me just in case I had trouble explaining something.

Humming to myself, I adjusted the stack of books on my hip as I left the library. My slippered feet made little sound on the tile floor.

“That I belong to you,” I sang softly. “That endless nights so far away are gone, and you could never love another. And I love you, too. I see it up above and now I feel the truth.” A sort of hop-skip mix worked its way into my step as I continued. “We overlooked us ocean deep, but now this river that we’re swimming through is promises we keep . . .”

“Dahlia?”

The echo of my name caused my singing to pause. “Doctor?” I called back.

“Can you come here for a minute? There’s something I need to ask you.”

“Um, all right,” I said, turning to walk down the hall in his direction instead of back to my room. That’s strange, normally he would’ve just tracked me down . . . “It won’t take too long, though, will it? I’ve gotta call Ashley in a bit. We have an appointment I need to keep.”

He paused to think of an answer that wouldn’t upset me, and I knew that was what he’d done because if that wasn’t the case, he would have just answered. “Uh . . . no! No, I-I don’t think it will.
maybe . . .” The ‘maybe’ was much quieter, and I most likely wasn’t meant to hear it.

Sighing, I hitched the books higher on my hip and continued down the hallway toward The Doctor. Better get it over with . . . I just hope he won’t try and get me to talk about our adventures. I’ve had enough arguments about that to last a lifetime.

The Doctor wasn’t that far away—just down the hall and in the medbay. The doors opened, and I nearly ran into The Doctor, who was tugging at his hair and biting his nails irritably while he stared at a long piece of paper in his hand. With a started gasp, I stumbled backwards out of his way; The Doctor fumbled over his own feet to not barrel into me. After a few mishandled seconds, we were both standing upright and unharmed. I had even kept hold of all the books on my hip.

“Sorry, Dahlia!” The Doctor exclaimed, glancing me over for any form of injury.

I shrugged off his concern, instead focusing on the piece of paper he hadn’t let go of even in the confusion. “What’s that?”

“Huh?” he followed my line of sight. His smile dimmed. “Oh . . . yeah, that . . . that’s what I wanted to talk to you about . . .”

“Okay . . .?” I repositioned the books on my hip, so I could hold out a free hand for the paper. The Doctor hesitated but handed the paper over. I looked it over; it looked something like a blood test, with the concentrations of all of elements in the body. All were familiar except for the last one, which was apparently highly concentrated in my body—its percentage was much higher than the others. “Doctor? What is this?”

He shoved his hands into his pockets and stared at the ground, scuffing his shoe against the grating. “It’s a scan I did . . . of you . . . when we got back from dealing with the werewolf. You looked like you were hurt, so I just wanted to make sure everything was all right . . . and I-I just need to know . . .”

“Need to know what? I’m fine, Doctor,” I said, gesturing to myself with the paper. “Look—no injuries, no vortex energy—”

“Don’t lie to me! There is vortex energy inside of you,” The Doctor interrupted, jerking a hand up to card through his hair. He froze halfway through the action. His expression twisted into horror as soon as he realized what he said. “No-no-no! I’m sorry! I-I didn’t mean to yell! I don’t want to fight about this! Sorry, sorry, sorry!”

He grabbed at his hair in that flustered way of his. I was quick to grip one of his arms and tug it away from his hair.

“Calm down,” I instructed firmly. Nodding, he took a deep breath and obeyed. I handed him the paper back. “Now, explain to me why you’re so worked up. Calmly.”

He took a deep breath and began explaining, “After what happened with the werewolf, I took a scan of you—just to see if there was anything immediately wrong, and I’m sorry I didn’t ask first, but I wasn’t sure if you would just brush it off or not—and, and . . .” He exhaled heavily, tugging at his hair. “There’s a buildup of vortex energy inside of you. The scans picked it up, and I didn’t know what to make of it at first but . . . Dahlia, is . . . is something wrong? Because I can help! You know I can! If something’s happened that you didn’t expect, you can tell me!”

The Doctor looked so eager and desperate at the same time, but that faded away as the new information set in. Vortex energy. Inside of me. At least I knew what the gold dust was about. I
was spitting up huon particles.

I realized I had spaced out, and The Doctor was waiting for some sort of answer or comment. I smiled in a way I hoped was placating. “It’s nothing. It’s supposed to happen. It comes in handy later on. Don’t worry.”

Apparently, that wasn’t a good enough answer, or maybe I was too dismissive? He immediately began pacing and attacking his hair again.

“But . . . humans aren’t supposed to have this type of energy inside of them. It could kill you! I don’t even know how you’ve survived this long! I don’t even know what it is!” He stopped pacing to fling his hands in the air. “Dahlia, it’s a sort of mix of regenerative energy and something else! You have regenerative energy inside of you! Who knows what it’s doing to your body?!” He moved to stand directly in front of me and gently grip my shoulders. “Dahlia, let me help. I have to do something!”

My smile became more genuine. Of course, his first reaction would be to try and help. He would never be satisfied with just staying on the sidelines, even if it was me telling him to do so. It was an endearing, if sometimes frustrating, trait. With a fake huff of annoyance, I leaned down briefly to set my books on the ground, so I could cup The Doctor’s face in my hands.

“There’s nothing to do. I told you: it comes in handy later. Everything’s going to be fine. Stop worrying. If it was something bad, I would tell you, you know that.” He swallowed thickly but nodded. “Good. And remember, it’s like you said, it could hurt me. But don’t you think that, if it was going to hurt me, it would’ve by now? Nothing’s happened. I feel fine. The only thing your scans show is that the energy’s inside me. Is the energy doing anything?”

He frowned. “Not that I could find. It’s just . . . there. I don’t know what to make of it really.”

I forced my smile to be and my eyebrows to rise. “Then believe me when I say that everything’s fine. It’s all going how it should.” Liar.

“Exactly how it should?”

“Yes.” Despicable.

“And it’ll take care of itself?”

“Yep.” Most revolting being in the universe.

His eyes were wide. In any other situation I would have thought he looked all-knowing, but right now all I could see was his innocence.

The Doctor’s stare didn’t waver for several seconds. Sweat gathered on my back.

Believe me. Please. Don’t make me break your heart.

“All right. I trust you,” He says with a small smile. “‘M sorry. You probably think I’m such a worrywart. But I just can’t stand the thought of anything happening to you. I really don’t know what I would do without you.”

Okay, that one hurt.

He kissed me. Slowly, dragging the action out for several seconds. “Dahlia . . .” He licked his lips and tried again. “Dahlia, I . . . you’re the most important person in the universe to me, and I . . . I l.
He trailed off and spat out a humorless laugh. “All this time and I still can’t say it. Why can’t I say it?”

Warmth bloomed in my chest, thawing the chill the lies had brought. “It’s all right, Doctor. You don’t have to—”

“But you deserve to hear it! You mean so much to me, and I can’t say three tiny words. Is that the kind of man I am? The kind that can’t even tell you how much he cares for you? That’s so—”

I cradled his face in my hands, gently clamping his jaw shut with my thumbs. “Doctor, stop talking. Now. I want you to listen to me, very carefully, okay?” He nodded. “I would love to hear those words from you, and maybe someday I will but for now? Just knowing is enough. Understand?” He nodded again, eyes wide. I giggled and kissed him. He’s so adorable. “I love you, don’t forget that.”

He followed my mouth eagerly. “And the same to you. Even if I can’t say it.” He pressed more enthusiastic kisses to my mouth. “I can’t tell you, but I can show you. Mm, please, Dahlia Tombew, let me show you how much you mean to me.”

I flushed as he trailed kisses down my jaw and throat. “I-I’m supposed to call Ashley today,” I panted. “I’m supposed to start teaching her about space and time travel and . . . oh.”

He bit at the sensitive area behind my ear. “Mm, it can wait. Ashley’s not goin’ anywhere and neither are we.” He left another a trail of marks on my throat. “Come on, Dahlia. The world doesn’t end because we take a bit of time to ourselves.”

“All right, all right . . . you can stop marking your territory already.”

“I’ve been wanting to get my mouth on you for weeks. All this time, I’ve been burning up just thinking about touching you like this again.” He tugged at my clothes, attempting to remove them as quickly as possible. He managed easily enough with my shirt before moving on to his jacket, tie, and own shirt. “I know it’s only been a few weeks, but it feels like forever.”

I dropped my pants just in time for him to pick me up. Letting out a sound of surprise, I wrapped my arms around his neck and legs around his waist. At least I decided not to wear shoes today, I thought while toeing off my slippers.

It had been a while since The Doctor had attempted to what he was doing now so I decided not to test our luck. I kept my hands around his neck and my kissing light and non-distracting. Unfortunately, The Doctor didn’t get the memo that he should focus on walking instead of groping me. It took us longer than it should have for us to get to The Doctor’s room, even with the TARDIS helpfully shifting corridors.

Once in The Doctor’s room, I squirmed until The Doctor was forced to put me down. Then, it was a race to get undressed and climb into bed.

I perched over The Doctor, straddling him. “What do you want, Doctor?” I asked lowly, gently grinding my hips down onto his erection. His breathing was so ragged I was almost afraid he was hyperventilating. “You have to tell me.”

He was silent except his panting. A blush covered his cheeks, slowly darkening the longer we kept eye contact. He licked his lips and hesitantly spoke, “I want you to take what you want from me.”

I blinked as I tried to understand what he meant. “What?” I asked, furrowing my eyebrows.
His cheeks darkened even more, but the words flowed out of his mouth in a desperate current. “I want you to use me, Dahlia. Use me for your own pleasure and pay no attention to mine. Please.”

Stunned silent, I sat back on The Doctor’s thighs while I examined him. He certainly was more . . . submissive in this regeneration. He was laying loose and prone under me with his hands resting above his head. His face was flushed and eyes glassy. His chest heaved with each breath. Heat pooled in my lower abdomen as a slow smile spread across my mouth. Leaning over him, I pressed a hand to his chest to hold my weight. His hearts sped up at the touch.

I giggled. “Well, aren’t you positively filthy in this regeneration.” I sat back again. “All right then, we’ll do it your way . . . or, better yet, my way.” I shifted off him completely. The Doctor looked up at me with confusion, but I cut him off before he could speak. “You don’t need clothes. Get rid of them.”

He immediately scrambled to do as he was told. I on the other hand began looking up at the fabrics that made up bed’s canopy. Most of it was one fabric, but there were several lengths looped and entwined along the border of the canopy. Suddenly struck with inspiration, I reached up and grabbed a strand. The wine-colored fabric slid into my hand with only slight tugging. I tested its strength and give and smiled. The fabric had give but not enough to rip, and it wasn’t too smooth yet remained soft to the touch. Perfect.

“Dahlia?”

I looked back to The Doctor. He was kneeling on the bed, curiosity written plainly on his face.

“What’re you doing with that?” he asked, eyeing the fabric in my hands. I couldn’t tell if the glint in his eyes was caution or excitement.

With another soft laugh, I ignored his question and ordered, “On your back. Arms above your head and against the headboard.”

He did as he was told. I bit my lip to contain a smile when his limbs jerked in the motions he was prone to when he was out-of-his-mind eager about something. Once he was settled, I straddled his stomach and brandished the fabric.

“Are you okay with me tying you up?” I asked softly. Even if it was what I wanted, I wouldn’t do something he didn’t want to do.

The Doctor’s eyes were half lidded and so out of touch I worried he might pass out. He swallowed thickly. “If it’s what you want—”

“Doctor,” I admonished, resting my hands on my legs.

He attempted a pout, but it was a lost cause in the deep blush that overtook his face. I felt his hips try to subtly shift underneath me as he repositioned himself. On impulse, I shifted with him, scooting backwards until I could drag my clothed folds over his straining erection. The Doctor immediately responded; his hips began grinding up against me. I allowed myself to enjoy the feeling for a moment, tilting my head back while exhaling heavily through my nose, before firmly pinning The Doctor’s hips to the bed.

I frowned down at him. “Answer the question, Doctor.”

He wiggled slightly and huffed when my hips refused to move. I didn’t worry; if The Doctor really wanted me to move he would move me himself with his still-free hands.
I continued to stare The Doctor down, but he refused to speak. “I’m waiting~” I cooed, giggling when his breath hitched at my tone. “I can wait all day. You, on the other hand, can’t. Or won’t. You aren’t exactly known for your patience.”

At his shy glance, I expected more resistance. Instead, The Doctor nibbled on his bottom lip before nodding.

I tilted my head to the side. “What was that?”

Another pout, but he sighed. “Yes, I want it. Now, can you please get on with it?”

I giggled happily and readjusted myself until I was straddling his chest again. “Of course,” I purred, twisting the cloth through my fingers. “Arms against the headboard.”

The Doctor did as he was told. I felt a curl of heat go through my belly at how obedient he was. I briefly wondered if I could get him to follow orders outside of bed, but that was a thought for another time. Quickly, I secured The Doctor’s wrists to the headboard with a handcuff knot and tested it to make sure it wasn’t too tight or loose.

“That feel all right? Not too tight or anything?” I asked.

The Doctor hummed contentedly, stretching his wrists and hands. “Mm-hm, yep! Better than all right!” He beamed up at me before going limp. “Do as you please!”

Oh, I plan to. A smirk slowly curled along my mouth. I traced my hands along his arms, down his chest to stroke briefly along his ribs, before cycling back up his chest to settle over his pounding hearts. The smirk shifted into a smile at the quickness of his pulse. I let my comfort filter throughout the room . . . then abruptly drug my nails down The Doctor’s sides, leaving raised red trails in my wake.

The Doctor sharply inhaled at the sudden pain and then hissed through his clenched teeth.

Affectionately, I stroked the marks now marring The Doctor’s skin. “I’ve always wanted to mark you. Nothing too permanent, just something that would let anyone who looked at you know that you belong to me,” I murmured. “I don’t like being possessive of you. I don’t want to suffocate you or make you think I need constant reassurance that you want me, but sometimes . . .” I traced my nails threateningly up his stomach and sternum. His cock twitched beneath me. “Sometimes I see everyone’s eyes on you, and I just want them to know. I’m proud and oh so smug that you’re mine, but I want them to know it.”

“Please,” he whimpered, straining his chest up against my hands. “Please . . .”

“Please what?”

“Do it. Mark me. Please, please, Dahlia, I want you to,” he begged.

So, I did. I raked red lines with my nails along his chest, stomach, sides, hips, and even his thighs. I bit at his throat, jaw, and collarbones, leaving darkening marks and hickeys. I hadn’t drawn blood but knew I could if I wanted to. The Doctor would probably revel in it. His cock was straining under me. I could feel his wetness leaking through my panties and mixing with my own fluids, causing the fabric to stick to my folds in the most erotic of ways.

After several minutes of marking my territory, there was hardly a spot on The Doctor not bearing some sort of mark. Even his back hadn’t been let unscathed; I had reached underneath him to leave burning red lines there, as well.
The Doctor took it all and begged for more.

He didn’t ask for pleasure, though I was sure he was receiving it from my actions. He begged for me to take and take and take. He never asked me to give.

I wondered if this was some sort of penance for his guilt but quickly discarded that thought when I ground down against his hard on, and The Doctor gasped out in pleasure, his moan greedily swallowed up by my mouth.

I wanted to own him. Every guilt-ridden inch. Every part of his scarred soul. Every dark crevice. Even the pieces that should probably be forgotten and especially the ones that shamed him. But I couldn’t own him, refused to, in fact. He was my equal, not my possession. I couldn’t lock him out of the TARDIS and in some Earth apartment. To do so would be a sin, a crime against creation and wonder and joy. He could not thrive by being owned, and I would not shackle him down. I would follow him wherever he wanted to go, across the stars to the far edges of the galaxy and to the end of time itself. I would be chased by villains of every known and unknown species, kidnapped, and threatened. I would run without rest. I would face death every second of every day if that was what it took to stay with him. I couldn’t own him, but I could have this.

Those thoughts stayed with me even as I pulled my underwear to the side, so I could fill myself with The Doctor. He entered me easily—I was so wet so eager so ready—and I reveled in the stretch of my internal muscles, rocking gently to feel how intimately he settled inside of me, before riding him in earnest.

I hadn’t expected The Doctor to be so loud, but he was full of surprises. He was louder than I could ever hope to be, moaning and shouting and begging so prettily underneath me as he struggled to thrust up into my bouncing. A part of me wanted to pin him to the bed again, to force him to stop all movement and show him that submitting would be the only way to gain his reward, but I couldn’t stop. I was too close. He filled me too seamlessly and rubbed against the spongey flesh of my g-spot too perfectly for me to stop. My thighs were burning, and my pelvis would surely be bruised with how hard I was riding him; his hipbones were repeatedly cutting in my inner thighs; in a few hours the ache would fully settle in, but I couldn’t care less.

My orgasm snuck up on me. I hit my peak, gasping for breath and grinding onto The Doctor’s cock so I could ride out the pleasure with him against my g-spot. Hunching over The Doctor, I roughly gripped his hair and order, “Cum. I want you to cum now.”

The Doctor obeyed with a high-pitched whine, jerking his hips up to ride out his orgasm and squeezing his eyes shut.

Cooing encouragement, I kissed and pet all over his face until he relaxed into the bed with a soft sound. He leaned into my touch and grunted in annoyance when I removed my hands to untie him.

“Leave ‘em,” he rasped, voice hoarse from all the noise he made earlier.

“No,” I deadpanned, “I’m not gonna leave you tied up just ‘cause you’re blissed out.”

He grumbled slightly but didn’t put up a fuss when I untied his hands and began rubbing his wrists to make sure the blood was flowing properly. The cloth had left red marks in his skin, but beyond that there wasn’t any damage I could see. I inspected the marks I had left all over The Doctor’s body. Some of them looked exceedingly vicious, like he had been mauled by something. A sliver of guilt curled in my stomach. Yes, I wanted to mark The Doctor, but I didn’t want to hurt him.

“Hey, none of that,” The Doctor said, cupping my face. “I wanted you to mark me. I still do, you
know, when these fade, and I need new ones.” He gnawed on his bottom lip as he mulled over his next words. “I’m yours, Dahlia. The marks are physical proof of that.” He cleared his throat. A red flush spread across his cheeks and down to his chest. “Next time maybe . . . maybe you could put them higher? So that—um, so that my clothes don’t cover them . . . maybe?” His voice gradually turned into an embarrassed whisper as he spoke until he simply stopped talking.

Snorting, I pulled off him and curled up at his side. “If you’re willing to answer any questions, then sure.”

He yawned and pulled the covers over us. “Whatever I need to do, I’ll do it.” He yawned again.

I scoffed and poked him in the ribs. “Whatever, Doctor. Sleep. I’m tired.” But he didn’t hear me, he had already fallen asleep.

I woke up sometime later, most likely not long since the fluid leaking out of me hadn’t dried yet. Sighing contentedly, I nuzzled into The Doctor’s chest hair. Our cocoon in the blankets was so warm, and I knew I would fall right back to sleep if I let myself but that would have to wait for another day. Ashley was waiting, and I wasn’t about to shirk my responsibilities regarding her newfound interest in all things Time & Space.

I stretched out along The Doctor’s body and then sat up, grimacing. I needed a shower; I smelt like dried sweat and sex. I moved to get out of bed but was stopped by an arm around my waist.

The Doctor grimaced, pulling me back with his arm, and curled up around me. “Stay.”

“I need to call Ashley, remember?” I said softly, running my fingers through his hair. “She’s counting on me to teach her.”

“She can wait,” he said.

“She has been waiting.”

“Fine,” he relented, releasing me and continued to grumble as he rolled away from me. “Do what you want, but I’m staying in bed.”

“Really?” A smirk slowly split my mouth. “Pity, and I thought you’d like to shower with me, but I guess I was wrong.” I pet his hair once more and retreated to the bathroom.

The TARDIS had already started the shower. The five rainfall shower heads spread the water perfectly in the center of the shower while leaving the walls with several inches of “dry” space. I stepped under the water immediately, blindly reaching for a lime scented body wash when the water flowed over my eyes. I lathered a Pruveli bath sponge I got on some market planet and began washing.

“TARDIS? Could I get some music please?” I asked. A song—“Non, je ne regrette rien”, I believe—began to play. “Thank you.” The TARDIS hummed in response. I sang along to the song, rinsing away the body wash and beginning to wash my hair. I was so caught up in singing that I almost didn’t hear the door opening and someone entering the bathroom.

Smirking, I said, “I thought you didn’t want to get out of bed.”

The Doctor didn’t say anything. He just wrapped his arms around my waist and rested his chin on
my head.

I snorted. “You’re getting conditioner on your face.”

“Don’t care,” he mumbled.

Smiling, I picked out a dark, fruity shower gel for The Doctor to use, poking him in the shoulder with the bottle when he refused to acknowledge it.

He grumbled but accepted the offering, only to let it drop to the floor so he could trace his fingertips down my waist and over my hips. His hands trailed farther down, going between my thighs to prod at my entrance.

I let him, enjoying the gentle touches, and leaned back into him when my hair had been rinsed. “Doctor,” I breathed.

Two of his fingers slid easily inside of me. He groaned and nipped at my neck. “You’re still wet,” he growled in my ear.

Gasping, I went up on my toes when he began fingering me in earnest. “O-of course! It’s only been a few hours!”

I felt his grin along my throat. His teeth scraped along my skin as he spoke. “I wonder how much wetter you can get? Hm, love? D’you wanna find out?”

I only had time to breath out an enthusiastic “Yes” before he pinned me to the wall and fucked me open.

“Come on, just one more round. What’s it gonna hurt?” The Doctor pouted.

I pulled on a t-shirt, saying, “Me when I finally manage to call Ashley. I promised I’d give her, at most, a few days to read over the first section of books I lent her before we begin lessons. No later. And with you, one more round will have us doing nothing but fucking for the next few days.”

He came up behind me and pressed his body completely against mine, rubbing his hands over my hips, ass, thighs, and crotch. “That sounds like the opposite of a problem.” He pressed his face into my neck to inhale my scent. “Oh, god, I can smell you.”

I refused to allow myself to become breathless from his touches. “Don’t you do that all the time?” Nine was never this touchy, and the experience was both welcome and overwhelming.

“Mmm, yeah, but now you smell like . . . arousal and me and sex and home, and I just want to curl up to you and inhale that scent forever.”

I remained steadfast despite the pleasurable shudder that went down my spine and said, “Well, unless you plan on cuddling up to me while me and Ashley talk, you’re out of luck.”

“Actually . . . that doesn’t sound like a bad idea.”

Rolling my eyes, I finally managed to connect to my laptop to the TARDIS’ server. The Doctor cuddled up to me as we waited for the signal to connect. He attempted to nip at my neck, but I shoved him away with my shoulder.
“No,” I said sternly.

And just in time. Ashley side of the connection had come online. The webcam’s picture started out black before slowly coming into focus.

Ashley beamed at me. “Dahlia! Hi! Was wonderin’ when you were gonna call. I’ve gone over the books and . . . Why’s The Doctor cuddled up to you?”

“Don’t mind him.” “Don’t mind me.” The Doctor and I answered at the same time.

Flicking my hair into his face, I said, “He’s just in a mood. Don’t worry about it. I’m gonna be the one teaching you, not him. He’s not allowed to make comments unless he knows I’m saying something wrong, so act like he’s not even here.”

Ashley seemed hesitant at first. Her eyes kept flicking from me to The Doctor. “Um, all right. Well, where d’ya wanna start?”

“Let’s start with what you don’t understand. What questions do you have?” I wasn’t really sure how to go about teaching Ashley, but I supposed working backwards would give us both a point of focus.

Ashley eagerly pulled out a piece of paper—I was almost shocked by the amount of writing that covered it. She immediately began speaking, “Okay, well, there are two things that confuse me the most. One, how does an event become a fixed point, and two, how can you keep skippin’ around the universe and in time doin’ what you do without creatin’ a paradox? I don’t get it.”

The Doctor perked up. “Ooooo, clever. Those are clever questions.” Then, quite rudely, he added, “When did you get so clever, Ashley?”

I scowled and elbowed him in the stomach. “Hey! What did I tell you about rude comments?” He refused to answer, instead choosing to bury his face in my neck and pout. “Well? What did I tell you?”

He sighed. “They stay in my mouth.”

“Exactly,” I said. “They stay in your mouth. Now be a good boy and be quiet or leave.” The Doctor pouted but snuggled closer to me. “All right then. Quiet it is. Now, where were we?”

Ashley and I talked for hours and only stopped when Jackie finally wandered into Ashley’s room and demanded to know what she was doing. That led to Jackie weaseling information out of me (The Doctor had fallen asleep) until Ashley managed to get her to leave.

“Thanks for doin’ this, Dahlia,” Ashley said.

“It’s no problem and you know it,” I replied, gathering up my notes, papers, and books into neat piles.

“I should probably let you go then. Same time next week?”

“Sounds good to me.”

I shifted to end the transmission, but Ashley spoke up:

“Um . . . I . . . no, never mind!” she stuttered.

“What?” I asked.
“It’s nothing. It’s stupid.”

“What is it, Ashley? I told you that you can ask me anything. I won’t laugh, I promise.”

Wringing her hands, Ashley stared down at her desk as she spoke. “Well, it’s just . . . I was curious about . . . when you looked into the heart of the TARDIS and, ya know, went back to save The Doctor? That was a fixed point, right?”

“Yeah, what about it?”

“Well, aren’t fixed points normally named? I read through the books and there was nothing that sounded anything like what you told me. I was wondering what yours was called . . . if that’s all right?”

That’s all? Don’t know why she’s so worried about asking that. “That’s it? Yeah, that’s perfectly fine! I think the best name for it is Bad Wolf, since that’s what I became when I looked into the heart of the TARDIS. Bad Wolf can also be code for the end of the universe, so you’ll have to be careful about that. Does that answer your question?”

She brightened immediately and beamed at me. “Yeah! Yeah, it totally does, thanks!” She giggled. “Goodnight, or good-whatever it is in the Vortex.”

Glancing at The Doctor snoozing on my shoulder, I snorted. “Goodnight’s probably as accurate as we’re gonna get. Talk to you later, Ashley. Same thing for the next set of books, okay?”

“Okay! Bye.”

I disconnected the feed and sighed. That went much better than expected. I gently traced random patterns on The Doctor’s arms that were tightly around my waist. I honestly didn’t expect her to get everything so quickly or to at least have more questions on the mechanics on everything. I really should stop underestimating her all the time . . . She’s come such a long way since I first met her . . .

I yelped when The Doctor fell backwards, pulling me with him. He curled us up on our sides, so he could spoon me.

“Doctor!” I snapped, attempting to squirm out of his grip so I could face him.

He refused to let me move. Instead, his grip tightened, and he hummed out a response. “Time to sleep. Shout later.”

I scoffed and squirmed a bit more. Not for any actual purpose, but for the principle of the matter. “There’s probably lots of stuff we should be doing right now instead of sleeping.”

“It can wait,” he sighed, snuggling closer to me.

Huffing, I stopped squirming and relaxed. Napping wasn’t such a bad idea . . . it was a rest day after all. I settled into my spot, basking in the warmth given off by the living heater pressed up against my back. I had almost managed to drift off to sleep when The Doctor stiffened.

“Dahlia?” he whispered.

“Hm?”

He curled closer to me. “I’m sorry.”
I let sleep pull at me again. “Don’t worry about it, Doctor. Know you’re not used to humans askin’ smart questions.”

“Not that.”

His tone caused me to wake up instantly. I tried to shift so I could face him, but The Doctor’s grip tightened. He hid his face in my neck and hair and muttered something into my skin.

“Doctor? What is it?” He didn’t say anything, but I felt his chest heave, like he was suppressing a sob. “Doctor? Is something wrong? You know you can tell me anything.” I tried to keep my own panic under wraps. If The Doctor was crying, then something was horribly wrong.

“I failed you,” he whispered hoarsely. “I—I haven’t even tried to keep my promise to you.”

I frowned. “What promise?” I desperately wanted to turn around and comfort him, but his arms refused to budge, and he curled even closer around me.

The Doctor whined pitifully. He dug his short nails into his wrist. I pried his fingers away before he could do serious harm to himself, rubbing soothing at the slightly bleeding welts and threading my fingers through his.

“I promised to get you home. When we first met, I promised to get you home, but I’ve been selfish, so incredibly selfish. I got caught up in showing you the universe, and you were always saying that you were meant to be with me. That you were here to fix a broken part of the timeline and couldn’t leave because this universe would fall apart without you here. I let myself be consumed by you, because you’re fire and electricity, wild and untamable while remaining in control. You’re a supergiant waiting to go supernova, but you always reign it back in unless you’re pushed too far. I could see it under your skin, in your eyes the moment you strolled onto the TARDIS the first time. I was consumed by you, but you didn’t consciously pull me in, no, no, I wanted to be consumed. Still do . . . but after Bad Wolf, when I saw your fire and control at its most devastating, I never thought about how you would most likely want to leave. You miss your family, and you don’t belong here, in this universe. I’m sorry I failed you. I’ll find a way to get you home, I promise, and I won’t break this one this time.”

The Doctor was shivering by the time he finished speaking. The shudders wracked his body against mine, and I could tell that he was trying not to cry, or on the verge of crying.


“It is, Dahlia. I—you’re so important to me, Dahlia, you don’t even know how much I—I won’t let you down. I won’t. No matter what. I’ll get you home.”

Dozens of thoughts fluttered in and out of my mind. I can’t leave. You need me here. The universe will collapse if I leave. There’s still Canary Wharf— Instead of saying any of that, I said the only thought that mattered. “Doctor, this is my home.” The Doctor’s hands twitched in my grasp, but I didn’t release him. I took a deep breath, continuing, “This dimension, the TARDIS, you . . . I’m already home. Doctor, I’m not going anywhere.”

He stiffened against me. His grip loosened briefly and then retightened. His chest heaved several times before stopping. The Doctor curled around me, kissing my neck and shoulder with feather-light touches. “Thank you,” he whispered.
“No problem. Now, it’s time to sleep. TARDIS? Can you get the lights?” The lights dimmed to nothing. “Thank you very much.”

Sleep overcame me, and there was peace on the TARDIS once again.

End Notes

I'm thefandomhoarder on tumblr, so you can come talk to me over there!

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