Careful Surrender

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by tenscupcake

Summary

Shaken after the events on Sanctuary Base of Krop Tor and haunted by the memory of losing each other, the Doctor and Rose are driven into each other's arms. As they begin to tear down the meticulously constructed walls the Doctor has built around their relationship, he is forced to confront the reasons he put them up in the first place, but the demons of his past stifle his attempts to open up to her. The pair walks a tenuous line on the threshold of emotional and physical intimacy, and though tension builds and their frustration intensifies, neither of them is entirely prepared for what may happen once they travel beyond the boundaries of friendship.
Chapter 1

She found him at work under the console, out of sight beneath a panel, the whirring of the screwdriver and the sight of his brown pinstriped jacket strewn across a bundle of controls unmistakable clues that led her in the right direction. After a nightmare she couldn’t shake, preceded only by more restlessness and anxiety than actual sleep, she resolved to give up on resting for the night. The events of the day persistently tormented her thoughts – strangers with evil red eyes and covered with portentous hieroglyphics stared at her from behind her lids; the threat the beast had made to her rang in her ears; the horrific sight of the monster, engulfed in flames, was seared into her memories. But in sleep her subconscious had of course conjured the worst of it: forced her to relive hearing devastating news over the intercom. And the nightmare went on further; mercilessly it illustrated the various ways he might have met his end while she was held against her will, powerless, screaming and crying for him with no means of saving him. Her Doctor was gone, had fallen through never-ending darkness.

As she woke, head throbbing, dried and fresh tears painting her cheeks, chest heaving, she immediately recognized it had only been a dream. She could perfectly recall hearing his voice on the rocket’s comm system, the flood of ecstatic relief at the sound of his voice, vibrant and alive, inquiring for her. And she remembered reuniting in the console room only a few hours earlier. His breathtaking smile brightened the dim, greenish room, brought light to the darkness that had overtaken her mind in those few bleak hours, and she dashed into his arms, her feet lifting off the floor as he hugged her with his characteristic enthusiasm. And yet, it wasn’t only a dream. It was one of the worst days of her life, and experiencing it twice was asking too much. She dreaded the images her brain had stockpiled and ready for her the next time she closed her eyes, and thirsted for the comfort of the Doctor’s smile, his passionate techno-babble, his brainy specs… perhaps his embrace, if she could coax another from him. Sleep was creating more pain than reprieve, and she knew he could so effortlessly mend her heart with his mere presence.

The grating shifted under her feet just as she glimpsed a bit of his hair sticking out from beneath the floor, and his head peeked out curiously at the sound.

“Rose,” he said quietly as he saw her approaching, setting the sonic on the floor and climbing up to her in a flash. “What’s wrong?” he asked as he took her by the shoulders, his eyes scanning over her face anxiously from behind the glasses she knew he’d be wearing. Right, crying always left damning evidence on her face. She should have planned a pit stop to the loo to smooth over her appearance before searching for him.

“Oh, ’s nothing,” she lied. “Just a stupid nightmare.” She offered the best smile she could, but it felt incredibly weak in its execution, and as expected he didn’t return it.

“Been a tough day for both of us, I think,” he said softly, and pulled her to his chest more quickly than she ever anticipated. Well, he must have needed another as much as she did. His arms wrapped around her, one hand resting in her hair, the other stroking softly between her shoulder blades, so very effectively keeping all her troubles at bay. His tie must have been discarded with the jacket; a few buttons of his shirt were unclasped. The rarely exposed skin between his chest and neck was pleasantly warm against her cheek, she breathed a sigh of content as her arms circled around his waist, pulling him closer.

“Yeah,” she breathed a delayed response against his skin, too busy delighting in his proximity; the nightmare was but a distant memory while he was around her like this. He kissed the top of her head, squeezed her tighter for a moment and released her; and it was too soon but she didn’t fight him.
“You should go back to bed, get some rest. You must be exhausted,” he said, his hands finding his pockets as their embrace ended. Business as usual, he mustn’t allow the situation to escalate, had to maintain the casual nature of their relationship somehow. Though more and more she felt they were balanced on the edge of a knife, on the verge of falling one way or the other.

“I just can’t sleep,” she told him. “’S why I came to find you.”

“Yeah, me neither,” he said with a sigh, swiping the glasses from his eyes and setting them on the console with his jacket, then dragging a hand down his face as he so often did in nervousness or frustrated, deep thought. “Although, that’s a bit more common for me. Only sleep a few hours a night. Well… most nights. Well… some nights.” And in a single sentence he sounded so Doctor she couldn’t help but give him a genuine smile now. “What?” he asked, taking notice of her grin and mistaking it for teasing.

“’S nothing. So, what have you got up to while I’ve been dozin’?”

“Oh, the TARDIS was a bit damaged in the fall,” he responded flippantly, so she didn’t panic at the thought. “Thought I’d speed up a few of her restoration processes. But really, if it wasn’t this, I’d have found something else to keep me busy, forget about all this.” He gave a small sniff, one of the many ways he often displayed his nonchalance, and as he crossed his arms became the picture of ease, despite just admitting that he, too, needed to distract his mind from the tumultuous day. It brought her comfort to know she wasn’t alone in that. She always knew tinkering was a way of coping for him, and she felt a twinge of guilt that she didn’t have her own method to deal with intrusive thoughts: he was presently her only coping mechanism. She wouldn’t ask much of, him though, she defended herself. Just to be with him.

“Show me,” she said, picking the sonic screwdriver off the floor and placing it in his hand. She wasn’t about to press him to delve into his current emotions, to elaborate on his last sentence. Instead, she wanted to see him work, hear words tumble excitedly out of his mouth as he explained the marvelous inner workings of the TARDIS. It was all the encouragement he needed; he flashed her a charming smile as he grabbed it and wheeled around to return to his prior spot.

“Right, then!” he exclaimed as he kneeled in front of an intimidating set of wires and controls, patting a step to invite her to take a seat next to him. He dove headfirst into an explanation of this particular panel, and what precisely he meant to adjust. By now most of the words were familiar to her, but she couldn’t fool herself into thinking she actually followed and understood his lecture – it was like he shifted to fast-forward whenever he tried to explain time-vortex related subjects. She simply delighted to hear him speak with the vigor and zeal that he did, and she soaked up every word, mesmerized as he pointed and fiddled with the screwdriver. She felt herself beginning to relax, much more at ease with him before her, his typical self. No orange suit, no chasm between them, no interruptions between their communication through the radio, no looming threat of losing him to the abyss again.

And suddenly, she couldn’t tell if it was ten seconds or ten hours later. The Doctor, whispering her name, but she couldn’t answer. His hand on her arm, shaking lightly. Both his arms around her then, the cold floor of the TARDIS disappearing from beneath her. Her hands clutching at his shirt. Footsteps on the grating. Descending into a pile of blankets and pillows, her hands pried from the fabric they grasped. All processed in a haze as her eyelids adamantly refused to open.

The nightmare returned with a vengeance. She woke in the same terror, but now disoriented, unable to remember the Doctor carrying her back to her bed, and waking to a dark room devoid of his presence. It seemed only a moment ago she was awake, listening to him monologue TARDIS repair when the dream suddenly overtook her.
“Doctor?” she half-shouted in the direction of the open door, hoping he was still nearby. She heard his feet plodding down the hall only a few seconds later, and soon he stood in her doorway, a striking silhouette against the soft glow from the hallway, and she breathed out her relief.

“What is it? What’s wrong?” he said swiftly as he entered the room, the words muffled a bit like he had a bite of something in his mouth.

“Sorry, I just… didn’t remember coming in here. And, um… the nightmare – ”

“Another one?” he asked, and as he came closer she saw that he was indeed eating something, though she couldn’t make it out.

“The same one, really.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, sitting on the edge of the bed now, far enough from the light that she could clearly make out the half-eaten sandwich in his hand. “I just popped off to get a snack. I was gonna come check on you again.” So, her subconscious recognized immediately when he left, then; it must have been what cued the haunting of her slumber to resume. This was definitely a problem. But her heart fluttered at the thought he planned to check on her; hadn’t left for the night, really.

“You were?” she asked.

“Course,” he said simply, taking another bite of what she guessed was banana and honey stuffed inside the bread, from the sugary aroma. “Although, I am a bit offended that you fell asleep when you were the one who asked me to tell you what I was working on.” She knew it was his joking tone, but she did feel bad about falling asleep on him. It wasn’t her intention at all.

“I know, I’m sorry. Not sure what came over me,” she replied truthfully.

“Oh, I knew you were tired. I was expecting you to fall back asleep any minute,” he explained with a wave of his hand. On anyone else, the arrogance would be irritating, but coming from him it was harmless; she knew it was a veneer for the self-deprecating tendencies he kept buried beneath the surface.

“Well, I didn’t,” she said with a sigh.

He was silent for a few moments, still enjoying the snack, then asked her something she had been certain she would have to ask herself.

“Want me to stay until you fall back to sleep?” She thought about it; as much as the yes wanted to claw its way out of her mouth, she knew whenever he left again she would be in the same sleepless state. Greedily, she needed the assurance he was there even in sleep. He quickly misinterpreted her hesitation as a negative.

“Or not… I can go now, that’s fine,” he started, and there wasn’t rejection in his tone; rather, having finished the sandwich, seemed to be rather enjoying sucking off every bit of honey that had oozed onto his fingers.

“No, it’s just… d’you think… can you stay even after that?” She heard the deep breath he took in and whooshed back out, but his back was turned to what little light streamed in from the hall, his face obscured sufficiently that she couldn’t read his eyes.

“Rose…” he began, the answer clear in his tone.

“Please?” she stopped him before he could explain. “You don’t have to do anything. Just sit there.”
She realized how stupid her request sounded as the words left her mouth.

“Oh, right, like that’s gonna work. Me, sitting here bored half the night?” he quipped. She crossed her arms and glared at him for the insensitive remark; but he was right, it was silly to think he could.

“Yeah, I know, got more important things to do I’m sure. Nevermind,” and she dropped her head back on her pillow in defeat.

“Rose, you know that’s not what I meant,” he recovered, a little exasperated, a hand running through his hair as he contemplated. He stared at her for a long moment, ambivalent on the issue of staying or leaving it seemed.

“Well, budge over then,” he said suddenly, motioning her with a quick tilt of his head. “I’ll just have to try to sleep, too.” She knew the irritation in his voice wasn’t authentic; not when he had been convinced so quickly.

She immediately made room for him, shifting to the second pillow as he pulled off his trainers before climbing in next to her. They both turned to face each other across their pillows, and the closeness facilitated seeing his face properly. She took his hand and gave it a light squeeze.

“Thanks,” she said with a grin.

“Course, Rose,” he replied, barely above a whisper, returning the squeeze, one side of his mouth turning up in a smile. “Off you go, then, back to sleep.” It would have sounded like an order, but he lifted her hand to his mouth, his lips touching her skin just for a moment, then made soothing circles with his thumb across the back of her palm as he returned their hands to rest on the sheets. “I’m not going anywhere,” he murmured, and the words draped around her like a down blanket.

“Night, Doctor,” she whispered back softly, one more smile lighting up her face. His eyes watched her as she fought to keep her own open, closing and flashing open again, her mind repeatedly demanding reassurance he was still there. To be fair, this was certainly a first for them. The fifth time, she opened her eyes to find his closed. She had only seen him asleep the one time, when he collapsed immediately upon leaving the TARDIS after he regenerated. It was a stressful experience that she had never associated with the serenity she saw in his features now. She was quickly lulled to sleep by the sound of his slow, rhythmic breathing, their hands still linked together.

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As he opened his eyes, the recollection of the events of a few hours before – Two hours… fifty-two minutes, the incessant clock in his brain informed him wearily – were slow to catch up with him. The first sensation to register with his senses was a warm arm draped over his stomach. He remembered with a thrill of delight – more than he was probably allowed to feel; honestly, it was gushing up from inside him – that he had fallen asleep next to Rose. Of course he had. There were no other circumstances in which he could have nodded off, even for a bit, given what had transpired the previous day. He rolled over gently to avoid stirring her arm, hoping to glimpse her face, but only saw the subtle rise and fall of Rose’s shadow, as it had become. Seemed the TARDIS had flipped off the remaining lights on finding him unconscious.

“Ahem,” he whispered, hardly audible even to himself; the second he thought the request for additional lighting, the lamp in her bedroom glowed to life at the dimmest setting the TARDIS could manage. At a girl, he thought. Even after centuries, he didn’t think he could ever not be proud of his ship even for trivial successes like this. Right, back to the matter at hand. He had asked for the lights for a reason, after all.
Oh, he could get used to this.

Rose, asleep next to him. Asleep over him. Well, her arm at least. He couldn’t remember the last time he let anyone this close, or had anyone trust him so completely, to plainly ask him to climb under a blanket with her while she slept. Her beauty was breathtaking, quite literally this time, nearly ceasing his lungs from their normal function even then. He could still never properly prepare himself to gaze upon her perfection when he first saw her each morning. A few loose strands of her golden hair fell around her face, the rest spread across the pillow next to his. Lovely, thick lashes to contrast the light color of her eyelids, closed so peacefully as she slept. Her skin, fair and flawless, tinted with a peach hue from his improvised night light, a light pink flush on her cheeks from the heat of the blanket around her. And she must have become too warm – said blanket was removed from half her form, messily folded down at her waist. Her sleeveless top (if that wasn’t enough to drive him mad) strayed from her pajama bottoms to reveal several inches of the skin of her stomach and hips. And, upon focusing, he could smell that signature scent of hers, the one she had explained was an expensive cocoa cream Jackie bought her, though he maintained there was something more underneath that. The craving to taste her overwhelmed him from the pit of his stomach – to feel just how delectable her skin was under his mouth, to brush his lips along the soft, smooth curves he could almost feel under his gaze, to discover the mysterious flavor of her skin with his tongue, that he could almost taste from its scent, almost… He cursed himself, taking in a steadying breath and covering his face in his hands.

For the love of all that was holy, she was sleeping. Did he even believe in anything holy? With a stab of irony he realized, if he did, it would be her. And somehow, it hadn’t stopped him from desecrating her pristine image by producing these kinds of thoughts, and not infrequently. Because, beautiful as her body was, even as it called to him so intensely in that very moment, it wasn’t why he was indebted to and entirely besotted with Rose Tyler. Stunning as were her each and every curve, each strand of flowing hair, each incredible smile that broke from her lovely, full lips to reveal perfect white teeth (and usually a flash of tongue to tease him with), they were not what made her truly exceptional to him. Her most exquisite beauty came from within: the spectacular, shining light that was her soul. Selflessly, she had saved his life twice now, left her mother and (ex?) boyfriend alone to travel with him, when he was still such a stranger to her, and not even a human stranger. Yet, so early on in their travels, she understood him so much better than anyone else could. As though it was simple, effortless for her, she recognized he had no one else, and pledged forever to him. His Rose. His beautiful, wonderful Rose.

But, then, of course, she wasn’t his. Not by any stretch of imagination. How could he ever be worthy to call her his? Everything he’d done. People he let down. Or abandoned. He was a murderer. A genocidal maniac. He never let on, but nightmares were nothing new to him. Time Lords slept considerably less than humans, yes, but a significant contributing factor to his general lack of sleep was terror of the scenes he faced when he closed his eyes. He was a nightmare at his core. His soul was damned and black as hell, if there was one. Which he had started to perhaps consider, seeing at least some form of devil existed. Then there was the ceaseless mill of impure thoughts he continually stained their relationship with. She didn’t know most of this information, of course. But she knew enough, and even when he was much rougher around the edges, snapped at her and hurled insults at humanity and lived in a sort of half-alive misery in the aftershocks of the Time War, as his previous incarnation, she cared for him even then. Would sacrifice anything for him, even then. She was the long-awaited sunrise to his never-ending night, brought him laughter and happiness again, helped him see that life was still worth living. If nothing else, she was worth living for. And the most frightening part was: he hadn’t known how desperately he needed her until he found her in that basement. And she was a treasure he was exceedingly lucky to have found, however undeserving he may have been. Someday he would have to pass on some gratitude to the Nestene Consciousness.

And he realized, the last few hours, he hadn’t once dreamt of grisly battles and ghosts of a lost
family, a lost race. But on waking, the persistent and more temporal threat lingered heavily on his mind. What Rose had told him, about the beast saying she would die in battle. It had collided terribly with traces, fragments of premonitions already brewing in his own mind that he and Rose were doomed to separate, sooner than he could possibly endure. He cursed inwardly again, Gallifrey and every last Time Lord and their damned knack for catching glimpses of the future. Well, futures. Possible futures. And one possible future loomed ominously before him, though the details were fuzzy, grayed-over, as though clouded by a storm. He couldn’t handle the thought of losing her, not when he had only just welcomed her into his life, the first real guest on board the TARDIS since his planet’s Armageddon. Externally he’d rejected the thought, had assured Rose the beast was lying. But he couldn’t stop the doubts and fears that assailed him inside.

In the end, that’s why he had never let himself cross that line with Rose… or why he wouldn’t have, if she wanted the same thing. If. Did she? His head was too thick to be sure, but she often gave him subtle clues of her interest in him. However, there was the slight age gap, not to mention the species gap. He could be reading her body language all wrong. He liked to think he grasped the nuances of human behavior and interaction, took pride in it even. But Rose could not be treated analogously to all the other humans he knew at the moment; she was unique in that she never ceased to surprise him with her actions. It would be insulting her to try to reduce her to chemistry and biology, effortless as it was for him to catalog any other human like such. He liked to think he grasped the nuances of human behavior and interaction, took pride in it even. But Rose could not be treated analogously to all the other humans he knew at the moment; she was unique in that she never ceased to surprise him with her actions. It would be insulting her to try to reduce her to chemistry and biology, effortless as it was for him to catalog any other human like such. He could always go for the direct approach: to candidly ask her, but even now his mind shied away from the awkwardness of such a scenario. If somehow she made her intentions clear (actualized the stuff of his fantasies, he thought sourly), and they were to cross that line… no. Losing her would be excruciating enough as is. Add physical intimacy to the equation? It would end him when the universe took her from him. Time Lords didn’t have the same ability to have casual sex that humans did. The verse from the Old Testament came to mind, about how two shall become one flesh in the consummation of marriage. Extensive and prolonged physical contact with a telepathic individual was exactly that – there was no evading it. And he wasn’t ready for that. Not when her subsequent loss was inevitable.

Despite his sound logic, he couldn’t stop the guilt that swept over him often for leaving her entirely out of the decision. His refusal to share his thoughts and intentions on the subject was hardly fair to her. But she didn’t have all the information, all the facts. Didn’t realize what it would involve, what it would mean to know him, truly know him, all of him. He couldn’t subject Rose to the dark depths of his soul. He shouldn’t even be here, in bed with her and inviting so much temptation. But she had asked him, and how could he deny her? After everything she’d done for him, she deserved damn near anything she asked from him. He cursed again, cursed his stupid race with their telepathy and life span dozens of times longer than humans. A wave of disapproval at his frivolous use of profanity resonated from the TARDIS. Oh, now everyone’s a critic, he sassed back indignantly. In frustration he moved to roll himself back onto his back, but in his haste he forgot the arm around him until he felt it slide from him and land on the bed beside him. His every muscle froze to avoid jostling her further, but then she moved, her arm lifting from its place from the bed.

He turned to see her eyes hung open lazily, though she fought to open them fully, intense irritation clear in her expression. Before he could even apologize for waking her, she pulled herself to a sitting position, threw the blanket the rest of the way from her body, and swung her legs off the other side of the bed.

“Rose!” he called out as loud as a whisper would allow. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to wake you,” he started, but she started walking toward the door of the room, feet shuffling in her dazed state, as though she hadn’t heard him at all. He sat up, ready to jump up to pursue her. “Sorry! I promise I won’t wake you again, just come back, please” he pleaded with her. She wheeled around to face him.

“Doctor, ‘m goin’ to the toilet,” she said, dripping with attitude, her eyes closing even as she spoke,
the words slurred. Oh. He said it out loud, too, and she acknowledged him and left the room. And he remembered why he always gave her space in the mornings. One morning, such a long time ago, he brought her banana waffles he had just whipped up, waking her in the process, when she’d only been with him a few weeks. He found her an impossible mixture of catatonic and exceedingly annoyed, at simply being torn from blankets and sleep, or at him, he wasn’t sure, but hadn’t stayed around to find out. About half an hour later she emerged to share the waffles with him, in a much healthier state, and thus he’d learned his lesson.

But still, every now and then, when the more enthusiastic tendencies of his current incarnation got the best of him, he would burst into her room (at what he thought was a perfectly reasonable time to wake up, maybe 6 or 7 in the morning) to tell her about the planet they’d just landed on, or something he found in an old room of the TARDIS. And she would look similar to how she did in that moment, largely unresponsive and not requiring his excitement as she ordinarily would. Rose Tyler. Defeated a fleet of Daleks. Willingly faced the Cybermen without him on the off chance it might save her not-mother. Shot the devil out of a rocket and into a black hole (didn’t think he would ever quite be over that story). But couldn’t handle mornings. He laughed to himself, a stupid grin spreading across his face. It didn’t bother him a bit; he accepted and desired her in her entirety, hatred of the early morning hours included.

Fifteen minutes later, he was deliberating whether to search for her, fearing she’d become lost in the hallway or collapsed someplace, but not wanting to give off an air of condescension, as though she couldn’t manage a trip to the loo on her own. Before he could give himself a headache by over-complicating the small dilemma, she was walking through the door. Her eyes were decidedly less tired, her gait steady rather than shuffling, and she had justification for her extended absence cupped in her hands. The air filled with the strong but enticing aroma of coffee as she approached the bed.

“Coffee?” he asked her as she sat down next to him. “This early?” He raised his eyebrows in confusion.

“Doctor, ’s eight in the mornin’,” she replied simply, taking another sip. Well, he knew that. “And, ’s not just coffee,” she added. He missed it the first time around, but inhaling again he caught the secondary scent of chocolate mingled with the coffee grounds.

“Hmmm, brilliant,” he smiled at her. “But, I just mean, aren’t you still tired? You only slept a little over four hours. Don’t you want to go back to sleep?”

She sat with her legs crossed on the sheets, facing him. “No,” she replied, lethargy still evident in her voice, the caffeine had yet to exert it full stimulating effect. She took a small sip and absently ran a finger around the rim of her mug, staring into the chocolaty liquid for a long moment. “Doctor, there’s something I need to ask you,” she said softly, lifting her gaze to meet his at last. The apprehension and uncertainty in her eyes paralleled his own; he raced to predict what she would ask, figure possible responses to whatever doubts caused the sudden trepidation so dominant in her features now. Determined to ease her anxiety and bring back the smile he adored too much now, he granted her free rein for the inquiry, this time without his typical, evasive hedging.

“Okay,” he said, voice unfaltering, despite the tugging reminder his brain fired at regular intervals: that she may be about to ask about their relationship, send them hurtling off the edge of the knife on which he had so precariously situated them months ago. He quickly sat up and matched her position, crossing his legs beneath him and resting his arms on his knees, offering her the undivided attention she deserved. “Anything,” he continued earnestly, eager to demonstrate that he was, in fact, ready for anything. But in the protection of his mind he was scrambling to weave together his explanation, rationalization, and apology if she asked what he was expecting. “What is it?” He searched her eyes for a clue as he waited for her to speak, for any indication of her thoughts, but soon became lost in
the mesmerizing pattern he found there. Deep cocoa radiated from the center, transitioning to light brown petals floating through varying hues of green, swirled with a soft, honey-like yellow. The warm, earthy colors of a pond on a summer day, full of life. Although, she was a much greater masterpiece than a small body of water, he thought.

“You fell into the pit on purpose.” Okay, that he was not expecting. Hadn’t occurred to him once in the whirlwind of possibilities he entertained a few moments ago. Her voice cracked as the words came out in a rush, warning him of the now incipient possibility of anger or tears, or both. He despised seeing her burdened with either.

“How did you know?” he confessed, refusing to be the one to turn this into an argument. Truthfully, it didn’t matter how, and he may have asked it at least partly rhetorically. Again he had neglected to give her the credit she deserved; of course she would have figured it out. She was clever, obviously, but her distinctively strong spark of intuition made her exceptional. It allowed her to understand people, sympathize with them, help them. And when he said “people,” he included himself, even though he was alien to her. Again and again this quality proved her his perfect complement: he may be brilliant, but was often absolutely ignorant of much of the human experience, even bewildered by it at times. Rose was there to offer empathy to others they encountered in their travels; in a crisis he was often useless as a source of emotional support to humans. More frequently, she was there when he sorely needed a healthy reminder of the importance of compassion and sensitivity when he interacting with humans.

“Did they kill him, Mickey? Did they kill Mickey? Is he dead?” she had asked, her questions following hard upon walking into the TARDIS for the first time, the day he met her.

“Oh. I didn’t think of that,” he’d replied stupidly, blithely unaware of how she would suffer through and grieve what he had carelessly dismissed as inconsequential.

“He’s my boyfriend. You pulled off his head, they copied him, and you didn’t even think!? And now you’re just gonna let him melt!?” Honestly, he hadn’t thought. He was embarrassed to admit it.

“I’ll have to tell his mother...” She brought him up again a few minutes later. And he just stared. Oblivious. Confounded. “Mickey. I’ll have to tell his mother he’s dead, and you just went and forgot him, again! You were right, you are alien.” He could only launch into a bitter reply to her after that, but deep inside he was bewildered at how this utter stranger could tug at his heartstrings with her accusations. It had hurt him to hear her snap at him, dehumanize him so completely so soon after meeting him, and he hadn’t understood why. He wasn’t human, after all. That understanding wouldn’t develop until later.

“You’re not the tripping-and-falling sort of bloke,” she replied, snapping him back to the present, and he couldn’t help but chuckle softly, relieved she could still bring some humor to the conversation. She smiled back for a moment, though it didn’t reach her eyes. Still, he appreciated her effort to keep this conversation light-hearted, despite herself. “It was what Ida said,” she started again, playfulness replaced with solemnity. “She said you fell, but she couldn’t stop you. I didn’t think about it at the time. But this mornin’, when I woke up, I was thinkin’ through it…. She said stop, not save or something else. You must’ve wanted to go, and she tried to convince you not to, but it didn’t work. If it was an accident, she wouldn’t have said that.”

To hear so little and comprehend so much. Impressing him again. He’d have thought Ida would have made the situation quite clear, as opposed to offering the vague, even cryptic explanation she gave Rose. The toxic blend of shame and guilt intensifying inside him prevented him from constructing any sort of suitable response. It was all he could do to stare at her, concern for him evident in her eyes as they pleaded with him to respond, biting the inside of her cheek in anticipation. Although,
truthfully, there hadn’t been a question, just a statement of her deductions. He decided on an apology, furious with himself for having caused her any degree of pain.

“I’m sorry,” he said simply, unsure of how to elaborate, what he could add. Much to his chagrin, her eyes quickly filled with moisture, droplets threatening to leak from the edges just as she dropped her head down to escape his scrutiny, clearing them quickly with her thumb and index finger. He must be exceptionally, painfully thick. His good intentions produced the exact opposite effect he’d wanted. And his stupidity went even beyond that: he didn’t even understand why these, of all words he might have chosen, would provoke tears. Regardless, it caused him physical pain to witness it. He burned to reach out and comfort her, could burst into flames with longing any moment, to hold her tightly in his arms, alleviate her hurting with his embrace. But he didn’t know if she was upset with him, and his fear of making things worse kept him idiotically frozen in place.

“Doctor, just… why? How could you have?” she asked, bringing her face back to meet him, eyes cleared of moisture, fighting to keep composure and hold up her end of the conversation.

“Rose…” he started, struggling for words, dragging a hand through his hair in his frustration with himself.

“D’you know what it was like for me, back up there? Hearin’ you were dead? Did you even think!?” That same piercing question from the first day she met him.

“There was nothing else I could do!” he snapped, and she recoiled from him slightly. The words escaped his mouth in unfiltered anger and frustration, at the memory she had conjured of the utterly helpless situation that had prompted the fall. Far too harsh a manner to speak to her. He took a deep breath to dispel the torrent of emotion that had swept him up.

“I’m sorry,” he said much more calmly. “But Rose, I thought I was dead already. There was no way out. No TARDIS, no lift, and we were running out of air. If there was even a chance something was down there, I was willing to take it. If I hadn’t gone down, I’d have suffocated anyway. And in the end, really, it’s a good thing I did, because I found the TARDIS! Rescued the rocket with you inside it! Destroyed the devil! Well… that is, some physical creature that resembles one mythical interpretation of the devil…” he cut himself off. Where were all these words coming from? He supposed he was trying everything now, bringing up several different points and hoping something he said might offer her some consolation.

“But, Doctor, you didn’t know any of that, did you!? Honestly, what else did you think would come out of it except gettin’ yourself killed?” her voice broke on the last word. She avoided his eyes as she rebelled against her own emotions, took a moment to calm herself before continuing. “Look, I understand, Doctor. It’s not that I’m not glad what happened in the end, that the TARDIS was there and you came for us. But think about how you’d have felt if you thought I killed myself, then maybe you’ll understand. You didn’t even say goodbye,” she criticized him, tears in her eyes again. He was at a loss to explain without making her feel worse each time.

“How could I have? What could I possibly have said?” He had failed to even tell Ida anything of significance to pass on in the event she got to talk to her again, even though he thought it highly unlikely. He was rubbish at translating his constricted emotions into thoughts and actions that accurately conveyed them, and this objectionable fact of his nature seemed especially true with respect to Rose. The most important person in his life, and he couldn’t tell her that he loved her. He needed her.

“I don’t know. But Ida said you said my name. You should have waited for me.”

“Rose, if I thought I could have, I would have. Of course I wanted to talk to you again.”
Understatement of the millennium. “Trust me. But I didn’t think the communication was going to work again. It seemed like the line was severed somehow. Even if it did, I didn’t think it would be before – ” he stopped himself with a sharp sigh, at least having sense enough to know that finishing that sentence would upset her further. Rose turned around to set her mug on the nightstand beside the bed, apparently uninterested in its contents now, and turned back to sit in silence, pondering what he had just said. He understood why she was particularly upset now, at least, and quite right. Imagining the situation was reversed, as she had requested him, was excruciating, even though he acknowledged a better outcome did not seem possible at the time.

“Ok, you’re right,” she breathed out in a sigh, hanging her head in her hands. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t be blamin’ you. It was an awful situation to be in, I dunno what I would have done. ‘S just… I was so scared, Doctor. The whole time you were away. And then hearin’…” She gasped in the air, and let it out in jagged breaths, the raw emotions of the memory clawing their way to the surface of her mind; he understood perfectly, as they were doing the same inside him. “I thought I was alone… and that you were too, when you… And the nightmares…” she continued, in a bit of a rush now, incomplete thoughts spilling out, and still she didn’t look at him, her hands protecting her face from whatever she saw behind her lids. “You jumped on purpose in one of ‘em… and then I woke up and… It made me think and I realized, in the loo…” he stopped the whirlwind by placing a hand on one of hers. Slowly he pulled her hands from her face and lifted her chin, distraught to find the red eyes and wet cheeks he dreaded. He caught a stray tear with his thumb as he stroked her cheek, then pulled away from her.

“Rose, come here,” he said, with as much command as he could with his voice as somber and dejected as it was. He shifted from sitting legs-crossed to lying on his side, propped on his elbow, opening his arm out toward her, boldly inviting her for a degree of closeness such that they had never shared before, hoping with all the strength in his hearts that she would accept. He could not bear to watch her shed another tear. The scars the experience left on him were fresh wounds again, twice as large, doubled by the addition of her perspective, her anguish. His only desire was to comfort her, to protect her from further harm, to hold her close, feel her warm, soft, and alive against him, to never let her go. It was a risk, asking for this level of intimacy. But suddenly he decided seeking physical comfort in each other was warranted now, even obligatory in light of their recent trauma and the late confessions they had both made. He could make this work without sending mixed signals. Without succumbing to the overpowering desire that always consumed him when she was close to him. For her, he could.

And his hearts leapt as she accepted, crawling across the bed towards him at last. She grabbed fistfuls of his shirt as she dragged herself into him. His insides liquefied at the feel of all of her pressed against him, warmth radiated through him, calming his tensed muscles, easing his troubled mind. He hadn’t realized how much he needed that warmth, but now he realized he had been freezing all this time. But this cold was biting not at his skin, but at his hearts, ever since their last embrace in the console room had gracefully ended, the icy chill had closed around him, and she was a blanket fresh out of the dryer, cradling his spirit, bringing him slowly back to life. As she was known to do.

Her head nuzzled against his chest until her cheek found its resting place there and she breathed a sigh of relief. Knowing she was so content to lie against him lit his insides on fire. His arm came around to her back and pulled her even closer, greedily craving more than what she gave him, needing to feel her entire body against his. He let his other arm slip from holding him up, though taking care that they both sank gently to the mattress, and his hand trailed up the hair at the base of her neck, holding her against his chest as his fingers rubbed soothing circles into the back of her head. She hummed softly at the unexpected pleasure, and this innocent sound was almost enough to completely undo him.

He quickly ran through his earlier conversation with himself about the status of their relationship.
What were his reasons for forbidding amorous activities, again? Right, they were valid. But in this moment he found it difficult to think valid enough. Perhaps he should have that conversation with her. But now was hardly the time, was it? No, this moment was to comfort her. He just hadn’t realized how much he, too, needed this calming intimacy in that moment. He took a deep breath, expelled the inappropriate thoughts already accumulating in his mind at breakneck speed, and relaxed against her, burying his face in her hair.

“‘m sorry, Doctor,” she mumbled against his chest.

“Shh, don’t, Rose. It’s alright. I understand, everything. And I’m sorry. So sorry.” His sole intention was to console her now, to shield her from the horrors that she spoke of before, and conceal her from them until they would never find her again, as long as he was there. It was poetic, even cathartic, this sudden role reversal – that same relief and the fending off of sickening memories was what she had blessed him with each and every day since they met. Two become one… he thought. Perhaps it is right. But in that moment he was content to simply hold her as long as she still wanted him to.
Somehow she had drifted off again, in spite of her efforts to stay conscious to preclude the possibility of waking to find him gone again. Asking herself to stay awake was highly unreasonable, in retrospect. Her head rested comfortably against his chest, hands still clung to his shirt, the rhythmic beating of his hearts was a lullaby, coaxing her eyes to rest. His arms around her were the only blankets she needed, secured her from her nightmares and prevented her from falling to pieces again. She wasn’t sure how long she’d been out. Tempting as it was to stay nestled against him forever, she wanted to see his face, and to reassure him she’d recovered from the earlier mental breakdown that she’d tried her hardest to avoid.

She pushed herself back slightly, his arms loosening their grip on her in response instantly. He wasn’t asleep, then. She pulled away just enough to look up at him, and he gave her a weak smile. His hair was inexplicable; sticking out in all directions as it did when he mussed it up too much, a nervous habit. And it seemed he was uneasy even then, anxiety in his eyes, like he was expecting her to cry or yell again any moment.

“Something wrong?” he asked, his hands leaving her body altogether, one falling behind her and the other coming to rest at his own side, and she already regretted breaking up the intimate moment and losing his touch. She scooted herself up to his level, propping herself on one arm to look at him properly.

“No, I just… sorry, again. ’M fine. I mean, I’m better.” He had been so understanding and open with her, and she hated he had to see her like that. It can’t have been helpful for either of them. She intended it to be a serious discussion, not an overly emotional one. What was she thinking, though? Of course she would be emotionally compromised on finding the Doctor technically almost offed himself. As if the day hadn’t been enough of a nightmare, and as if she hadn’t had a plethora of nightmares in her head already as agonizing reminders.

“No need to apologize,” he said. “I’m glad you’re feeling better.” His anxiety quickly began to fade as he realized she wasn’t about to break down.

“Was it my brilliant cuddling skills?” he asked, a devious smile playing at his lips. She couldn’t believe the words that came out of his mouth, that he even knew the meaning of the word ‘cuddle,’ or that he would ever acknowledge it had happened again, let alone seconds later. She hid her surprise and gave him a smile in return.

“That might’ve helped, I think, ’m not sure,” she said, returning his playful tone.

“Well, think it helped me a bit, too. It’s been an insane twenty-four hours. Lost the TARDIS, almost got sucked into a black hole, jumped into another one, met the devil, and worst of all…” Silence fell between them for a long moment, his gaze drifting past her, as though the words invoked to the room whatever fear he’d started to describe. She was afraid he wished he hadn’t begun the sentence, but couldn’t resist pursuing his train of thought.
“Worst of all…?” she prodded. With a heavy sigh, his gaze returned to hers as he saw her properly again, those eyes ready to melt her on the spot as they so often did.

“It’s nothing,” he said unconvincingly, throwing in a small smile for her benefit, as if it would persuade her further. It was a bit insulting, truthfully. As if she couldn’t distinguish between his proper smile and the one of fakery when he tried to protect her from whatever thoughts he deemed she needed protecting from.

“Doctor – ” she began to protest his unsatisfactory reply.

“No,” he interrupted, index finger in the air in warning. “I’m just… glad it’s behind us. I thought…”

She knew the thought was in the same vein as the other unfinished reflection, and hoped this inability to finish sentences wasn’t becoming a habit. He moved his hand to her cheek, stroking it softly with his thumb while his fingers cradled her. She leaned into his touch, savoring the contact; it would take more than one cuddling session to recover from the nightmarish hours she passed thinking the Doctor was dead. In truth, she was desperate for a different kind of interaction, but pragmatism told her that was a daft hope. More than likely, once they’d left this room she wouldn’t get another moment like this with him for a long time.

But he surprised her then by pulling her in suddenly for a crushing hug, his hands clutching her back as he buried his face in her neck. She didn’t respond at first – couldn’t, really – having become so accustomed to resuming ordinary, we’re-just-mates life after even the most flirtatious or suggestive moment. She shook off the momentary shock so she could return his embrace, one hand running through his hair and the other at his back, pulling him close, his lean musculature molding to her soft curves perfectly. Her heartbeat thudded in her ears so hard she worried he could hear as she took it all in. This was unequivocally different from when he held her minutes before; she sensed a passion in it, an urgency. She breathed in the distinctly non-human scent on his skin, quietly savored the sensation of his disheveled, lovely hair tickling her fingers; she had always wanted to comb her hands through it but never had occasion. Especially remembering when Cassandra had that privilege from within her own flesh… when she had been just clever enough to snog him before he could say no. Perhaps she should take that approach. It might be all she ever got.

But then, he brought them to this new level this morning, and lingered there even now, and his lips very, very distractingly hovered at her neck, breath hot upon her skin. Was he trying to send a message here? She wanted it to be true. She wholly craved an even deeper intimacy: to truly forget her nightmares under his touch, surrender her worries to his lips, tremble beneath him with something very different from fright, find her release against his skin. She knew she fancied him before, but having thought she lost him, she wasn’t sure how much longer she could endure pretending that she didn’t, especially if he continued to make moves like this.

Her hands loosened their hold to free him as he started to pull away from her. His head fell back to his pillow, eyes on the ceiling in distant thought, but his hand found hers to link their fingers together, maintaining a trace of contact. She laid back as well, but turned on her side to face him, mind and heart racing together, both curious and nervous of what he might say next. In a few moments he mimicked her, rolling on his side so his face came to rest only inches from hers. He smiled briefly before closing his eyes, as in content, but his expression remained a mask she couldn’t read.

Her head was still reeling from the proximity, from the fantasy she indulged only moments earlier. Instinct nudged her forward until she lingered centimeters from him, but it was adrenaline that closed the short distance as she pressed her lips softly to his, overcome with the mounting need to be even closer to him, connected in every way possible. His sharp intake of breath was enough evidence of
his surprise, and the failure to kiss her back properly told her this wasn’t mutual. But his lips were
better than she remembered them, soft and warm beneath hers and tugging at her lower abdomen in a
way she hadn’t felt for ages. Better than from behind Cassandra’s veil, better than the ever-so-brief
celebratory peck he’d given her in Rome, though she’d scraped by with fantasies of both to lull her
to sleep for months.

Still he was rigid next to her, and suddenly this kiss had become just as non-consensual as the one
Cassandra had taken. She could feel tension growing in his face, could easily imagine how his brow
furrowed in consternation, and she pulled away, eyes still closed. She pulled her bottom lip into her
mouth and ran her tongue across it, relishing the taste, attempting to keep it alive for a long moment
as she realized it was all she would have.

She opened her eyes to find the Doctor had put about a foot between them, and the distance seemed
substantial now, given their fresh encounter. His expression was similar to the one she pictured
moments ago, confusion and shock manifest on his face. Ok, so she misread his signals. She
expected as much. But there was something more in his features… a sort of disappointment,
frustration. She went straight into her apology, hoping to avoid an awkward and likely upsetting
conversation.

“Sorry, Doctor. I just… got caught up in the moment,” her voice barely above a whisper.

“Rose…” he began, but trailed off, and she could practically hear how his mind was racing, thinking
but refusing to say the million reasons why he couldn’t, or wouldn’t, cross all the lines he had
carefully drawn around the edges of their relationship.

“It won’t happen again,” she added softly, and made to turn away from him, to escape the heated
gaze of his brown eyes and resist further temptation.

“Rose,” he repeated, one hand taking her shoulder before she had the chance to turn away. His eyes
searched her face, as though hunting for the answer to some unasked question, and she didn’t miss
how they flitted quickly to her mouth several times. His expression darkened into a frown, his
eyebrows pinching together in frustration as he continued to stare at her. “I can’t – ” he started to
speak again, but she cut him off.

“I know. ‘s alright, you don’t have to explain.” What was she thinking, anyway, stooping to the level
of the bitchy trampoline? It was just a product of the situation. The disturbing, frightening day, near-
death experience, him sleeping in her bed, her nodding off against his chest, the extended, decidedly
non-platonic hug, her overactive hormones… Okay. On second thought, she had excellent
justification for her advances. She just had the misfortune to have an apparently uninterested,
possibly asexual Time Lord on the receiving end of them.

“But, Rose – ” he started again, lifting his head off the pillow to prop himself up on his elbow, eyes
locked on hers. He was interrupted by the obnoxiously loud ring of her mobile. Blimey, where was it
coming from!? She patted around her trousers only to remember these were pajamas with no pockets.

“It must be my mum. Who else would it be? I should get it, could be important” she said, flipping
over to listen for the source of the 8-bit madness. She was actually grateful for this interruption.
Perhaps they could both just forget what just happened instead of talking about it. If he wasn’t on the
same page, then she didn’t know if she could handle what he was about to say. She ruffled up the
blankets with no luck and didn’t see it on the nightstand when she recalled her jeans from the day
before. She leapt off the bed and picked them off the floor, snatching the vibrating block from the
back pocket, long since forgotten once events turned downhill on Krop Tor.

“Hello, mum?” she answered quickly on the last ring.
“Hi, sweetheart,” her mother answered in a somber tone. “I don’t mean to bother you, Rose, I’ve just… had… quite a horrible day. Just wanted to talk to you for a bit.” She’d been upset recently, going by the way her voice broke.

“Mum, what’s wrong? Tell me what happened.” She looked over at the Doctor, who hadn’t moved since the phone started ringing, and his head popped up to look at her once he heard something was the matter. He came up to a sitting position and scooted to the edge of the bed to watch her carefully, like waiting for a signal to fire up the TARDIS engines.

She listened for a few minutes, not saying much until her mum had got most of the words out. Some bloke Elton, creeping around for intel on the two of them, using her mum to get to them. The bloody nerve. Well, this would be a welcome distraction from recent events, telling this bloke off. She considered that her mum might have exaggerated his villainy a bit, but nonetheless, felt obligated to do something. She had taken off and left her basically alone more than a year ago; she must get so lonely sometimes. She felt a stab of guilt that she hadn’t called her mum when she thought she was going to die. Or at any point thereafter, to phone her up for comfort, instead sought only the comfort of her Doctor. So much had changed so quickly. She consoled her mum for a few minutes and offered to beat him up, but her mum insisted she not talk to him. She complied and they said their goodbyes. She flipped the phone shut and looked back to the Doctor, still waiting patiently on the bed to be filled in.

“I’ve got to pay somebody a visit,” she told the Doctor as she flipped her phone. He still waited patiently on the bed to be filled in. “Let’s go,” she said, making for the doorway. He cleared his throat from behind her.

“ Aren’t gonna tell me what’s happened, then? And who do you plan to visit wearing those pajamas? A bit revealing, if you ask me.” The attitude wasn’t appreciated, but he did deserve to know. And he had a point about the pajamas. She gave him a summary, said she wanted to just give him a quick piece of her mind, then be off. He offered to prep the TARDIS for the trip while she got changed, and left her room without saying much else.

She couldn’t be upset. Honestly, she wasn’t. But she had no idea what to say to him to make the situation less awkward, so she let him walk away, probably feeling a bit bewildered and like things were unresolved. Which they definitely were. At least now she had an hour, maybe, to prepare for the conversation he may want to continue later. It wasn’t anger, or even rejection on her heart now; it was mostly just guilt. He opened up to her. Listened to her. Slept next to her just because she asked. Cuddled with her. She had to go and get greedy. It wouldn’t happen again, she promised herself that. If the Doctor wasn’t ready for more, she had to respect that. Because he respected her, even after everything she’d confessed to him. If he was never ready for more, she supposed she would respect that decision, too. The universe should really give her some credit for it. It would most likely mean lifelong celibacy.

The alternative was what, exactly? Sneak off with someone else, think of him the whole time? Maybe enjoy it for a few minutes, but then have the indulgence culminate in disappointment and guilt? Then, of course, she’d arrive back at the TARDIS in the morning to find him waiting for her. He wouldn’t question where she’d been or what she’d done, but he would know. She would see it in his eyes, the confusion and betrayal. It was infidelity, quite unambiguously in her mind, regardless of his stance on their physical relationship. No, it was the Doctor or no one.

Which is why she really, really had to stop remembering burying her hands in his hair, those few moments when his breaths were hot upon her neck, the way her mouth fit perfectly on his, the taste of him on her lips… is this all he is to me? She scolded herself. She recoiled from the thought of reducing him to nothing but an object of her desire, a plaything. He meant so much more. And he
had allowed them to take a huge step this morning, and sharing that closeness with him was beautiful, because it was mutual. These things had to be mutual. Did she want more from him? Sometimes unbearably so, if she was being honest. But she had to meet him at his level; he deserved that acceptance from her and more.

She focused on finding clothes suitable for returning to her native time zone (which she seemed scarcely part of these days) to pry her thoughts from the gutter they were increasingly tempted to crawl into, and was entirely unprepared when the ground lurched beneath her. In the middle of stepping into a pair of jeans, it was enough to swipe her off her feet and send her hurtling to the floor.

“Brilliant, thanks for that,” she complained, to no one in particular. Or, maybe the TARDIS could hear her. She was never quite sure what The Doctor meant when he said this ship was ‘alive.’ She hopped up to finish throwing on her clothes and headed out of her room just as the groaning of the engines ceased with another jolt. He must have been right about a bit of damage; this trip was particularly turbulent.

“Rose, you nearly ready?” The Doctor’s voice echoed from down the hall.

“Coming,” she called as she walked down the corridor. She arrived at the console just in time to see him disappearing out the door, quite disparate from his usual manner of walking out with her. Was he upset with her now? She supposed he had reason to be; she took slight advantage of him, didn’t let him finish whatever he wanted to say, and then practically demanded this trip. She hadn’t meant to upset him; she just wanted to forget about the incident and distract them both from the discomfort she had suddenly brought upon them. She darted across the console and hurtled through the door, but was not prepared the sight waiting for her.

The Doctor stood just outside the TARDIS, ahead of him a bloke that matched the brief description her mom offered over the phone. She wasn’t expecting him to park quite so close, but that part she could handle. It was the hideous, green, Slitheen-looking thing next to him that caught her off guard; it had faces jutting out all over its body like something out of a bizarre, low-budget horror film. The Doctor seemed neither intimidated nor protective of her over the monster, so she withheld her judgment of its appearance (remembering the unattractive but kind-natured Ood) and marched directly into her reprimand on Elton.

“You upset my mum.” He looked to her, to the green creature, and back to her in complete shock.

“Great, big absorbing creature from outer space, and you’re having a go at me?” he asked with raised eyebrows. Like he had expected something different on seeing the TARDIS arrive. The creature was strange, and definitely rousing concerns, but she didn’t let him distract her.

“No one upsets my mum,” she continued. Elton couldn’t answer her, as the creature interrupted him immediately.

“At last, the greatest feast of all – the Doctor!” it shouted in a terrible, gurgled voice. Ok, so maybe it was a threat. She should have guessed that at the sight of Elton on his knees before it, as though in defeat. Other things on her mind, she supposed. She retreated slightly to be closer to the Doctor. In the face of any danger, regardless of magnitude, her place was at his side. He maintained an air of nonchalance, failing to become perturbed or threatened by the creature even when it’d just labeled him a “feast.”

He took a few steps forward, meeting her as she retreated, and gave a few tries at naming the creature, all centered on the word “absorb.” It acknowledged it called itself an “absorbaloff.” Absorbing… the faces… she realized with a twist of her stomach that the faces contained in its form were absorbed people. She remembered her first impression of it looking similar to a Slitheen, and
thought absorbing was similar enough to wearing human skin that it could at least be a relative. She nudged the Doctor’s arm.

“It is me, or is he a bit… Slitheen?” she whispered. He didn’t reply to her directly, rather his inquiry was directed to the creature.

“Not from Raxacoricofallapatorius, are you?.” And apparently he wasn’t, but from its ‘twin planet’ Clom.

“Clom?” the Doctor asked, confused.

“Yes, and I’ll return there victorious, after I possess your traveling machine,” the creature boldly claimed. She fought the urge to taunt you and what army? Having seen the Doctor take on hundreds, thousands, even millions of hostile aliens at once, she was skeptical of this thing’s ability to follow through.

“Well, that’s never gonna happen,” the Doctor retorted, no trace of trepidation in his tone. Honestly, he sounded annoyed, might even have been giving this creature a bit of attitude.

“Oh, it will. You’ll surrender yourself to me, Doctor, or this one dies,” the Absorbaloff threatened. This kind of threat was the Doctor’s weak point. She knew he could never watch someone innocent die. The bloke she came here to rant at was now an “innocent” in her mind within a matter of seconds; death threats always put things into perspective.

“See, I’ve read about you, Doctor,” he went on. “I’ve studied you. So passionate, so sweet. You wouldn’t let an innocent man die.” It really was his universal reputation; he had just repeated almost her exact thoughts. “And I’ll absorb him, unless you give yourself to me,” he finished, looking to the Doctor for a response. She did as well, hoping he was formulating a plan, as she lacked one of her own, but still he didn’t acknowledge the gravity of the situation. She didn’t see a flicker of concern for Elton in his eyes.

“Sweet, maybe. Passionate… I suppose. But don’t ever mistake that for nice. Do what you want.” Disbelief at the words leaving his mouth was all she could manage for a moment, as she struggled to find words of reproach strong enough for his brazen indifference. She threw him the most judgmental look she could manage, but he wasn’t looking.

“He’ll die, Doctor,” the Absorbaloff warned.

“Go on, then,” The Doctor responded, prodding him on with a nod of his head.

“So be it,” the creature said. Was this just the Doctor blowing her anger at the bloke out of proportion, taking it to an extreme and sentencing him to death? A reflection of his sour mood from what had transpired between them a few minutes ago? Both seemed outrageously unlike him. But just as she was on the verge of attempting to bargain with the creature, to show some compassion where clearly The Doctor wasn’t, he spoke again.

“Mind you, the others might have something to say.” There it was. The plan he neglected to inform her of. It was a relief, but she rolled her eyes in frustration at his inability to communicate these things to her. She could only look on as events unfolded from there, and it was one of the strangest, most disturbing sights she had ever seen.

As fate would have it, the girl Elton fancied was a victim of the Absorbaloff, and she was sucked into the concrete as quickly as the monster when his staff backfired on him. It took only one tear down Elton’s cheek to break her; any ill will she held against him dissolved and she was at his side.
to console him the next moment. She very recently experienced the sensations of losing someone you loved, or at least, thinking you lost them. The Doctor kept his distance from them both, stoic, his eyes tense with some emotion she couldn’t decipher, until Elton had gained some composure.

He and the Doctor discussed something that happened when Elton was a child after that, a mysterious first meeting she was unaware of before. Before parting ways with him, the Doctor had one last trick up his sleeve. Somehow, he managed to partially recover the melted (was that the right word?) version of Ursula until her head emerged from a tile of concrete, functioning and apparently sentient. As happy as she was that Elton didn’t have to suffer the complete loss of this woman, the last glimpse she had of him holding a block of concrete and talking to the gray face protruding from it was one that she hoped she could purge from her memory as soon as possible.

“So… lunch?” the Doctor asked once they were both back in TARDIS, some of the positive energy that had been lacking in his tone returning. He tossed his coat over one of the corals and leapt up to the controls.

“Um, sure,” she replied, uneasy, not expecting such a casual question once they were alone together again. He had not been acting himself during the entire Absorbaloff/Elton fiasco. All the time he and Elton talked she’d been wondering if he would be the one to bring up her incident again. She should have anticipated he would avoid the conversation, now that their moment in her room had passed, and send them flying somewhere else. Though she was ambivalent on the Doctor’s choice to snub their earlier conversation, she was hungry enough that she conceded a lunch trip wherever his whimsical Time Lord brain would take them. He decided on someplace with “really great chips” within a few seconds of rambling and they were off.

To her surprise, it was on Earth, and from the scenery, cars, and technology, not far removed from her time. She hadn’t asked exactly where they’d landed; it didn’t matter much since they hadn’t left the planet. They stepped through the rickety door of an unassuming white building with chipped paint and a flickering sign and into a cramped, dimly lit dining room with maybe enough seating for twenty. She let the Doctor order for her, since he knew the place, and heard him request two sandwiches she had never heard of and two sides of chips. The young, blonde bloke behind the counter pointed to the Doctor’s left, to a black shelf with several packs of crisps on it.

“Well, go ahead and pick some out. We don’t make chips in-house.” His accent was distinctly American.

“Oh, right, sorry,” the Doctor smiled at him, “I mean, fries,” he corrected, emulating his accent on the last word. She turned her face from the cashier and bit down on her lip to keep from laughing; she didn’t want to embarrass the poor bloke. It wasn’t him she was laughing at.

“Oh….kay,” she heard him say, and proceeded to give the Doctor a total, which somehow he had the correct currency for. She didn’t bother to ask, but was glad she didn’t have to pay this time.

The Doctor was right. Despite her suspicion of the appearance of the place, they had some of the most delicious chips she’d ever eaten. For the duration of the meal they both evaded heavy conversation topics; instead transitioned from a discussion of potato varieties to potential destinations to visit next. The Doctor had shaken off much of the cold, unsympathetic pretense he’d worn earlier by the time they finished eating, but she grew increasingly curious why he had put it on in the first place, since it seemed not to stem from being in her presence.

“So, ancient Greece it is, then?” he asked excitedly as they stood up from the table. “Maybe Athens. Or Sparta. Well, maybe not Sparta. Don’t want to get hauled off to war.” He held out his hand for her, and she beamed at the gesture, a symbol that he hadn’t held a grudge against her and was still agreeable to return to the level of physical contact they were at before.
“Yeah,” she answered, clasping her hand in his extended one. “But, maybe tomorrow?” she asked, unsure if she could handle more being packed into this day.

“Aw…” he whined, about to protest.

“C’mon, it was only yesterday we both almost died,” she argued, and even as she said it was hurled back into the memories of the previous day. The Absorbaloff incident and a nice lunch had sufficiently distracted her mind from it, and she almost regretted bringing it up again.

“Ok,” he yielded. “I can do some more work on the TARDIS.”

“Yeah, I was gonna read, I think. Maybe watch a film. Just relax a bit.”

“What if we ran into one of the great philosophers?” the Doctor gushed as they walked hand in hand back to the TARDIS. “A chat with Socrates or Aristotle, could you imagine? That’d be brilliant!”

She only laughed. With his enthusiasm for distant places, a sense of comfort started to return, vestiges of life before Krop Tor resurfacing.

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After about twenty minutes of perusing the TARDIS library, Rose decided she would never be able to choose anything. To this day, she was overwhelmed by the volume of books contained in it; it was roughly the size of an average high school library. She considered taking the Doctor up on his offer to retrieve the last of the Harry Potter series from her near future, but didn’t want to chance the trip becoming a more extended stay than she planned. Wherever they went, distractions and obstacles seemed to follow them. ‘Quick visits’ and ‘fun excursions’ often turned into danger-fraught adventures that involved excessive amounts of running from hostile aliens or cyborgs and often near-death experiences. She could watch a film instead. It required less brain power, anyway, and she was still recovering from mental and physical exhaustion. She grabbed a blanket from her room and made her way to what she called the TARDIS’ living room; with a couch, television, and selection of films it was the closest equivalent. It had the same coral patterns as the console room, the same earthy tones on the walls and the ceiling, and thick cream-colored carpet similar to that of her room.

She wanted to keep the subject matter light, so she ended up with a Disney selection. She grabbed Beauty and the Beast from the shelf, slipped it into the player, and collapsed on the couch with her blanket, kicking off her shoes. The material on the cushions was something not found on earth; it resembled leather but didn’t have the same temperature-retaining quality that made leather uncomfortable in cold or heat, nor was it sticky against her skin. Smooth as silk, soft as a t-shirt, but durable as denim. She spread across the couch, settled her head into the armrest, and let out a small yawn that exposed her fatigue. She wanted rest, but not to fall asleep completely, still fearing nightmares returning, so she scooted up to a less supine position.

Pacifying and uncomplicated as she imagined the film would be, before much time had passed she couldn’t help but notice parallels between Belle and The Beast’s relationship and hers with the Doctor. The Beast had sharper teeth and considerably more fur than the Doctor, but he, too, suffered from loneliness and sought a companion, and to Belle he was comparably alien, enigmatic. His true sentiments remained obscured from her view, tightly sealed off from anyone who tried to expose them. He struggled to grasp the range and depth of Belle’s emotions, lost in the torrent of his own painful memories, guilt, and solitude. To him Belle seemed mercurial, impossible at first. He was quick to anger, dangerous, even frightening… but as the film progresses it becomes clear a big, compassionate heart beats from behind the beastly façade, the full capacity of which only Belle is able to unlock.

She liked to think the Doctor had become much more human during the time she had traveled with
him. Comparing the gruff, closed-off, and short-tempered man she met in the basement, who frequently used the phrase “stupid ape” and failed to see the significance of Mickey’s unresolved death, to the one who frequently had overly excited outbursts and held her this morning even as she cried, it was indisputable. But did she have the ability to truly unlock his hearts? Was he capable of extending the same kind of love she already professed to him, though not in so many words? Would he ever be prepared to kiss her and take a leap into humanity, the remnants of Time Lord burdens fading away upon his decision to become human, at least metaphorically so, for her? If she knew him at all, she was highly skeptical of such a scenario.

And thus the two characters were inherently different, in the end; The Beast had once been human, after all, and Belle helped him come full circle and recover his humanity by offering him her love. The Doctor was alien, was born alien, and would always be alien. He could never fully belong to the human race, though he spent almost all his waking hours with them, or else alone. His own kind had been decimated; none were left to befriend or comfort him. The dark turn of her thoughts made her long to seek him out right then just to remind him she would always be there. Regardless of his extra-terrestrial biology, he would always be her honorary human; nothing could stop her from spending the rest of her life with him. She decided that a long time ago.

Her mind had apparently raced ahead of the movie; she’d seen this too many times already. She hit the pause button on the remote just as Belle and The Beast started to throw snowballs at each other. She stretched a moment across the couch and creakily stood to seek out the Doctor, even if only to check up on him for a few minutes. But her search ended before it could begin as she turned to find him standing in the doorway, his hands in his pockets and hair endearingly ruffled.

“Hi,” she greeted him quietly, attempting to conceal her elation that he came to look for her first.

“Hi,” he smiled charmingly in response. He didn’t stray from his place in the doorway, as though waiting for an indication that she was agreeable to him joining her.

“How long have you been standin’ there?” she asked.

“Oh, just a moment, I just walked up,” he replied, but he ran a hand through his already unruly hair the way he did when he was uncomfortable. She let it slide.

“How long have you been standin’ there?” she asked.

“Oh, just a moment, I just walked up,” he replied, but he ran a hand through his already unruly hair the way he did when he was uncomfortable. She let it slide.

“Was just going to come and check on you,” she confessed.

“Well,” he started, stepping into the room and circling around the couch to approach her. “You know what they say about brilliant minds.” His voice was subdued and bordering on seductive as he stopped less than a foot from her to meet her eyes, a hint of a smirk on his face. She held his gaze for a moment, marveled at how his eyes could contain so much life and energy when he kept centuries of wisdom and chronic sorrow locked behind them. Pain she had seen in her first Doctor’s eyes, but that was largely absent in the Doctor standing before her.

No, this Doctor rarely showed that he missed his home planet or anyone from it, though she knew he did. She didn’t want to flatter herself by suggesting it was because of her companionship, but she couldn’t help thinking it anyway. From the moment he told her his home planet was lost, she offered him her camaraderie, dedicated herself to fending off his loneliness and helping him to heal. The notion was planted in her mind within only a few weeks that she could hardly ever leave this man, this lonely, mysterious stranger who was also brilliant and heroic and courageous. It was cemented there now; one of the only things she was certain of, in fact. She was a different woman than the one he’d found working in the shop; braver, wiser, more confident. Perhaps she was having an effect on him, too, changing him for the better.

“I think it’s ‘great’ minds you’re thinking of,” she chided back, returning from her reverie.
“Oh, semantics,” he replied, drawing out the ‘oh,’ as he turned from her and crashed onto the center of the couch, reclining against the back, one hand coming to rest across the couch while the other patted the spot next to him, inviting her to reclaim her seat.

“So, watching a Disney film, eh?” he asked, though more as a statement than a question. Cleverly, he had chosen the middle of the cushions to force her to sit in close proximity. She sat down slowly, backing against the armrest and angling her body to face him, forbidding more physical contact than was necessary, not wanting to provoke herself to another incident.

“Yeah, just… wanted something light,” she responded, trying to get comfortable while also squeezing herself into the corner of the cushions to maintain maximal space between them.

“We don’t have to watch it, you can pick something else,” she offered when he didn’t provide animated commentary on her film choice.

“No, it’s… fine, we can watch this,” he said, his eyebrows pulling together as he watched her squirming. “Are you alright?” he asked, a mix of confusion and concern in his eyes. She must look completely mental.

“Yeah,” she answered, halting her fidgeting and attempting a casual smile. “So, how’s the TARDIS looking?” she asked, not confident in her ability to appear nonchalant, hoping to distract him by prodding for a technical discussion.

“Good, yeah,” he answered with a few nods of his head. One hand went to the back of his neck as he turned to stare at the frozen television. “Should be ready for anything by morning.” It wasn’t exactly the lengthy explanation she anticipated. He gazed at the screen still frozen on the snowball fight for a long moment, contemplating some internal puzzle she couldn’t have guessed if she tried.

“Rose, this morning – ” he started as he turned back to her, his arm returning to the back of the couch as he brought one leg onto the cushion to orient himself towards her. Ok, so he was going to be the one to open that can of worms. Interesting. He neglected to finish the thought, so she took the opportunity to get a word in.

“Doctor, ‘m not upset. You don’t have to explain yourself to me.”

“Really?” he asked, conspicuous sass creeping into his tone. “What is it then, afraid? Repulsed?” He gestured to the space between them. She realized it was very possible he might not feel awkward about this morning after all, and was now befuddled by her refusal to accept his offer to sit next to him, opting instead to take them a step down from the level of closeness they reached this morning.

“No, no,” she insisted, already washed over with guilt. “Of course not.” One hand went to her forehead in remorse as she racked her brain for a way to explain without offending him further, or revealing the truth that she lacked trust in her own self-control. “I just… didn’t want circumstances to… escalate again.” She chose each word carefully.

“You didn’t?” he asked, as though disappointed, of all things.

“Uhm, well, no,” she responded, surprised by the question and confused by his expression. “Did you?” she asked, flailing at a vain hope.

“Well…” he hedged, eyes darting about the room, anyplace but to return her inquisitive stare.

“Seemed like you didn’t,” she accused, frustrated with his endless mixed signals. Honestly, he didn’t even meet her halfway when she kissed him this morning. He didn’t fight her, but certainly didn’t return her affection.
“I know,” he said apologetically, looking at her now. He took a deep breath and blew it out dramatically over their heads, as though preparing for endurance training. “There’s something you should know,” he began. “I thought of telling you this morning, but you caught me off guard. I reacted a bit, well…” he fumbled for the right word, and resigned to gesturing with his hands to suffice. “I’m sorry.” She didn’t want to break this rare moment of him opening up to her by speaking; she merely urged him on with a brief nod.

“Can you at least sit next to me properly now?” he asked, wide puppy-dog eyes pleading with her. She simply nodded again, terrified to say anything to disrupt his train of thought. “Good,” he said simply.

Without warning his hands clasped her ankles and he lifted her legs enough to swing them across the cushions until they were stretched along the back of the couch, her back against the armrest. She was unsure of the motivation behind this movement, almost certain it didn’t bring her closer to him, but he slid across the distance between them and laid down next to her, resting his head on the armrest. The couch was wide enough that his emboldened relocation didn’t cause any direct contact between them, but it was certainly not a position to take if one intended to maintain a platonic mood. Shocked at his willingness to return to some level of intimacy, but agreeable, she slid down from sitting against the armrest to lie beside him. She searched his deep brown eyes for a clue of what secrets he was prepared to reveal, but saw only mystery emanating from them, as usual. She shoved down the urge to touch his face, cursing him for looking so adorable and innocent while lying inches from her, sighing as he met her eyes. After a moment he lifted his head off the armrest and propped himself up on his elbow, without taking his eyes off her.

“Rose, you know one day, eventually, we’ll be separated,” he began, voice muted though not quite a whisper. “I don’t know how it will happen yet, but it’s inevitable. It’s like I said before, curse of the Time Lords,” he explained, accompanied by a gesture to himself. “But I have this… feeling. That it might be soon. Call it a hunch, I suppose… though, Time Lord hunches are a bit more powerful… well, a lot more powerful – ”

“Doctor, you’re startin’ to ramble,” she interrupted him, knowing he could talk himself mad when he was anxious, but also hating the words leaving his mouth, not keen to hear more of them. She lifted up to match his posture, propping herself on her elbow as he did.

“Sorry,” he replied quickly. He took a deep breath and slowed his pace considerably. “It’s already bad enough,” he continued to the point, raising a hand to her face to lightly brush his fingers across her cheek as he spoke. “I can’t make it worse, for myself, and more importantly, for you.”

“How d’you mean?” she asked. His palm rested on her cheek now, his thumb stroking lightly, a soothing, warm touch as he remained thoughtful of his response. She swallowed the contented sigh that fought to escape.

“Adding any sort of physical – If we… do this… it will only make it… I mean everything… much harder.” His difficulty expressing his turbulent thoughts gave him an innocent charm; it was rare that the Doctor was rendered so inarticulate. She understood the point he was getting at, nonetheless.

“But, Doctor…” she tried to begin an argument against his claim, but he ran his thumb over her lips, silencing her.

“I told you Time Lords are telepathic, but only by touch,” he said softly, his thumb leaving her mouth so she could answer, but she merely nodded in acknowledgement. She knew he had some sort of mind-reading abilities, but wasn’t really sure of how it worked, only remembered him telling her about reading Reinette’s thoughts and memories through a touch of her face. She shuddered, cringing at the image she’d conjured up herself, and mentally slapping his past self. She never did get
the chance to give him a proper smack, really.

“Well, that ability is strengthened during, well… while we’re… you know,” he trailed off, the hand that was on her face reaching back to nervously tug at his ear as he spoke. He examined her eyes for understanding of what he was getting at, and must have found it there, as he continued. “Makes it a bit more…” again he struggled to find the right word, and looked about as though it might be hidden on the ceiling or walls someplace.

“Special?” she ventured. He gave her a small smile as he looked to her again.

“You could say that,” he said simply, still not returning her stare. “So, I’ve always kept a little distance.” She nodded slightly, affirming one of three theories that had been churning in her brain regarding his subtle but obstinate unwillingness to taking their relationship to the next step, which she thought was confirmed by his less-than-optimal reaction this morning. The other two were worse, but it still stung to hear one of them actualized by the Doctor himself, and not by her own deductions.

She had barely time to mull it over, however, before he started again.

“But now…” his expression grew softer, his eyes finally meeting her own. Her heart leapt at this ‘but’. This ‘but’ could only lead to something contrary to what he just illustrated.

“Now, what?” She asked, impatient to hear the completed thought. He drew a deep breath, wearing the all-too-familiar visage of deep thought, though usually it came from bespectacled eyes. He inched closer, most of the already minimal gap between them disappearing, and took the hand that was closest to him in his.

“Now, I’ve nearly lost you twice.” His fingers found the spaces between hers as he confessed. “Now, I’m worried that – I don’t know. I was worried, when I fell. That you didn’t know.” She heard the regret in his voice as the honesty flowed out of him. Know what? she wondered. He didn’t say the words, those three words she came so close to exclaiming to him every day, but she thought it might be what he meant. He had never opened up to her this much, not even on the same continent as this much. He drew their hands up between them so he could move even closer, his body comfortably resting against hers, his face centimeters from hers now, only a promise of more.

“Maybe, if this is the best way…” he breathed against her mouth. Her heart thrashed in her chest, heat flooded to her cheeks in anticipation, and for a moment she considering kissing him again herself to end the teasing. But the thought was lost on his lips as they brushed against hers, softly but without hesitation. His hand let go of hers only to wrap around her and bring her closer as their lips parted and he gently pulled her bottom lip into his mouth. The couch and the film and the entire room faded into nothing and he became only thing tethering her to existence, melting her anxieties away just as she knew his touch could. Much too soon he was pulling back, but she allowed him the space, thinking he may have more to say. One side of his mouth lifted in a half-smile as he looked at her seriously, still from inches away, a hand still resting on her back.

“It was selfish of me. To never ask what you wanted.” She could only laugh now, still floating from the kiss. But she had to admit he was right about the selfishness; she had thought it herself several times, when he would flirt with her or linger on a hug, only to preserve his carefully constructed physical barriers. He never did consult or discuss the matter with her.

“Yeah, actually, you have been,” she decided to agree with him aloud. “Lord of mixed signals, you are, forget about time,” she added, hoping he could take the joke. He seemed to, as he smiled and gave a slight chuckle.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered earnestly, his chocolate eyes desperate to be forgiven.
“’S alright,” she whispered back, offering a smile to indicate she held no ill will. She reached out to touch his face this time, her fingers brushing along his cheek, her thumb tracing over a sideburn as her fingers nestled behind his ear. He welcomed her touch, leaning his head into her hand.

“Doctor, you’re important to me, and that doesn’t depend on whether or not we’re shaggin’. I was okay with the lines you made, because I knew you had reasons for ‘em, and that one day you would tell me what they were, even though I didn’t understand. Still don’t really understand… But I’m not pressurin’ you, Doctor, I respect whatever decision you make.” She couldn’t guilt him into this; she had to tell him the truth. She couldn’t deny her hormones were going completely haywire, much of her mind still lost in the feel of his lips against hers, but she fought to maintain control and composure. This conversation was damn well more important.

“Off you go, Rose Tyler, never thinking of yourself. Honestly, how could you be considering me? My big thick head and stupid rules? All this time I thought it must have been your decision, that either we might be on the same page, or you just didn’t fancy me…” he trailed off, genuinely puzzled.

“Y’know, you are awfully thick for a brilliant Time Lord,” she jested back, and he feigned offense before breaking into her favorite smile. “I’m not gonna ask you to do something you aren’t ready for, that’d be selfish. You don’t see yourself like I do. You’re wonderful, but you’re never thinkin’ of yourself, either.” Everything was starting to spill out of her; she hoped he would make her shut up soon. He stared at her in awe, as though stunned she could believe such things about him at all. He took a few deep breaths before he spoke.

“How can you even think I’m never thinking of myself?” he asked rhetorically, still astonished at the depth of her respect and concern for him. She wasn’t sure he meant for her to answer, and she couldn’t think of the proper response, at any rate, so she waited for him to speak again.

“This whole thing’s been about me, we’ve been doing things my way all this time. Rose, is this what you want?” he asked, ‘this’ being utterly obvious given their current position on the threshold of physical intimacy. She hesitated a moment before answering, dizzying at the thought of what he was proposing.

“Yeah, but – ” he stopped her before she could explain anything away, his hand tucking up her chin to close her mouth. She didn’t need it, she was about to say. You’re more important than my annoying human desires, she could have said. I have bad days, but I can take care of it myself… she thought. And it was true. She would make do of any situation with him.

“Stop,” he said softly, “Yes is all I needed.”

His lips found hers again as he finished; one of his hands trailed up to rest on her neck, fingers sliding through her hair, while the other squirmed beneath her to wrap around her lower back to delicately drew her body against his. She brought one hand to his hair, the thick strands brushing her skin as her fingers massaged his scalp, securing him against her. Her confusion died away, the clawing memory of the beast’s warning of her impending death faded, the memory of losing him dissolved as his lips collided with hers. He lightly sucked on her bottom lip, traced the other with his tongue, and as their lips parted he accepted all her worries and doubts into himself as he held her, protected her from any other threats she ever faced. Her comforter. Her Doctor. She’d needed this, needed him, for a long time.

She soon realized she’d forgotten about breathing. She gasped out a few ragged, irregular breaths around his lips, but it wasn’t enough. She had to separate from his mouth for some oxygen or she might pass out in his arms. The Doctor wasn’t disturbed; rather than catch his breath as she did, he trailed wet kisses along her jaw, her neck, down to her shoulder. He uncovered a sensitive spot just
at the base of her neck, and without thinking she breathed a soft sigh into his shoulder.

“Hmmm,” he breathed against her skin, dripping with arrogance. He went on exploring for a few moments before returning to the same spot as before to swirl his tongue over her skin.

His name was on her lips before she could restrain it as she arched into him, stunned by how quickly he had brought her to such a state. With that he lifted his head, and she opened her eyes to find him gazing at her with a stupid grin on his face.

“Yes, Rose?” he asked, teasing her. She lightly punched him on the shoulder for the remark, but couldn’t help returning his infectious smile. His hands reached up to cradle her face as he kissed her again, still gentle and careful as before, but suddenly she was with another man. This man’s hair was cropped to his head rather than sticking up in the perfect mess she fancied, and he sported a leather jacket instead of suit and tie. She was on Satellite Five, and her head was pounding. The Daleks had been destroyed, the station filled with their countless victims; pain and terror coursed through them both. Her mind raced with a million events, people, planets, galaxies…

“Come here,” the leather-clad Time Lord beckoned to her. “I think you need a doctor.” And he came to her rescue with a touch of his lips. All the memories with the time vortex spinning in her head were a bright and painful blur. She had never actually remembered the kiss until this moment, but now it seemed impossible she’d ever forgotten it; it was clear as crystal. His hands grasped her arms, intense light and heat radiated around them and his mouth was on hers, slow and tender and loving, a vivid contrast against the violence and destruction the ship had been bristling with only minutes before. Her impending death was cancelled, the Doctor taking upon himself the energy threatening to destroy her. And then she realized the cause for the sudden revelation: the memory stemmed not from a concealed pocket of her own brain, but from the Doctor. She pulled away, startled.

“Oh my god,” she gasped, staring at him in amazement.

“I’m sorry, is it too much? I should’ve asked. I’ve always got to ask,” he repeated. And he was honestly looking at her in fear he had scared her off. The lunacy of the thought made her laugh out loud.

“What? What are you laughing for?” he asked, offended now, his eyebrows pulling together.

“Doctor, ‘m not mad at you. How could I be? I was just a little… surprised. Why didn’t you tell me you kissed me then? Our first kiss, and I didn’t even remember it,” she marveled at the news that even before he regenerated, her Doctor had wanted her. She was frustrated that he kept it a secret from her, but didn’t want to start an argument right now. “It was a good one,” she smiled at him.

“It was, wasn’t it?” he smiled back, his earlier apprehension disappearing. “Thanks for saving me, by the way.”

“Anytime,” she beamed, wrapping her hands around his neck to pull him close to her again. “So, um… want to try that again?”

“Yeah,” he said with a soft chuckle. “But we’ve got time. And I’m a bit out of practice. It’s hard for me to… control. Can we take it slow?” he asked, nervousness creeping back into his tone. She wasn’t quite sure what he meant by being out of practice or what exactly he wanted to take slow, but ironically his uneasy confession only made him increasingly irresistible.

“Ok,” she agreed.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Here you'll get the first glimpse of the major liberty I took with the concept of Time Lord telepathy.
Also, please note the rating change but don't fling your hopes to the sky.

Perhaps it was immature. Perhaps he was too old for it. But the only thought he could manage was: *finally*. How long had he been waiting for this? At least since the night they met Charles Dickens and the Gelth. Maybe even before that. Her nails scraped along his scalp, her fingers twisted in his hair as he memorized her curves, reveled in her natural, sweet perfume. The taste of her skin, soft and warm beneath his tongue, the sensual noises leaving her mouth as he discovered new sensitive spots. It was all too much... and he never wanted to stop. But his hands had begun to wander curiously, more tempted with each passing second to slide a hand further down her back, feel the contours of her chest, start loosening articles of clothing. And that wasn’t his intention with her tonight. He wanted to apologize for the mixed signals, provide her with an unmistakable token of his affection, lacking the courage to tell her candidly. And he had accomplished both, he thought. He planned for a lengthy kiss, sure, but not for things to escalate too far.

After the brief kiss she instigated this morning, he had spent hours mulling over his introspective discussion with himself in the middle of the night before. He thought he could share a deeper intimacy with Rose (only after an obligatory battle with persistent indecision). With the critical qualification that they take things slowly. He still wasn’t prepared to have his entire subconscious crash down on her, not tonight. They could take things day by day and see what may develop naturally, perhaps as a normal relationship would. He remembered scoffing at the thought of applying the word ‘normal’ to their relationship. If only he could be normal to her, a normal, human man without a nine-century age gap, telepathic tendencies, and a lingering case of post-traumatic stress disorder.

But at the moment he couldn’t seem to remember any of that. Her lips and her scent and her little moans were stirring every dirty secret he had ever tucked away in their time together, and they were certainly enough to trigger a certain... biological indication of his current state of mind. Yet he could hardly pull himself away from her, could hardly bear for his lips or his hands to leave her body now, to lose the warmth she provided with her arms wrapped around him. And yet, he was like a teenager, uncertain and inexperienced, prolonging their first proper kiss without advancing it, painfully aware of the damning evidence of her power over him but fiercely hoping that she wasn’t. Sluggishly, his brain started to register that he should ease them out of this. He knew he couldn’t completely fulfill their needs tonight, and continuing down this road would inevitably leave them both aggravated and unsatisfied. Which he supposed he could handle, but he didn’t want another occurrence of misleading her in his ledger.

Before putting some distance between them, he allowed himself one more visit the spot just below her right ear that he recently discovered, his teeth scraping her skin just slightly for emphasis. Oh, but it was unwise to tease her without intending to follow through. She cried out and arched into him, rolling her hips against his in such a way that he was sure she would have felt what he desperately didn’t want her to. His lips froze just over her skin, nervous to look her in the eyes. He hovered there only for a short moment before she surprised him again.
He felt her fingertips skim across the zipper of his trousers, undeniably getting the tactile confirmation she sought. He swallowed hard as her hand lingered there, his apprehension proliferating by the second. Like a teenager again. She ran the back of her hand up along his length, just one light stroke, and through two layers of fabric, no less. But he couldn’t have stopped the groan that slipped from his throat if he tried as the shockwaves of pleasure coursed through him.

It was embarrassing. But it had been such a long time, he considered giving himself a free pass. Decades. He never found a human he felt comfortable doing this sort of thing with after the Time Lords were gone. And even before that, he wasn’t exactly getting many offers in his (to put it kindly to himself) older-looking regenerations. And he never satiated himself, having convinced himself it was repetitive and an utter waste of valuable traveling time. And so through the years he had become a coiled spring, wound particularly tightly once Rose joined him, and much of his acquired self-control disintegrated with that brief touch of her hand.

A dangerous sort of selfish greed overtook him as her hand returned to rest on his back instead. He brought his head up to meet her eyes at last and saw the same lust there that was surging through him. And as he caught her lips again, wet and insistent, he drove his body into hers until she was pressed against the back of the couch, craving more of the friction she’d scarcely teased him with moments before. His hand trailed across her back, her waist, over the curve of her hip, ghosting across her leg and down her inner thigh as she quivered next to him. At the inside of her knee he applied the slightest upward pressure, and she understood instantly, her leg lifting up to wrap around him. He supported her bum as he nestled into the extra space between her legs with a slow thrust against her center. Their mouths gladly consumed each other’s soft, contented sounds, any attempts at actual words lost on each other’s lips.

He needed to stop this. Soon he wouldn’t be able to stop a connection from forming, and even he couldn’t predict what she would see. But he moved his hips against hers a second time. Longing to be inside her but knowing he couldn’t, wasn’t ready. Why was he doing this? He could think of no reasons other than it felt impossibly good, and he was selfish. Again. This time she pried her mouth from his, his name on her lips as she gasped for breath, a symphony to his ears. Discovering that the effect he was having on her mirrored the one she had on him only made him ache with need. She still fought for air so his mouth drifted south again, trailing open-mouth kisses down towards her chest and across to her shoulders as the fantasies began to overwhelm his mind. Hearing her cry out as his fingers glided through her hot, wet folds, her nails clawing at his bare skin. Tasting her arousal as she urged him on, her hands buried in his hair, feeling the softness around his lips as he brought her to a climax with his tongue. Her legs, wrapped around his waist, arms around his neck as he bound himself to her, hearing his name again and again as he moved inside her.

Well, this wasn’t good at all. In fact, it was quite antithetical to his resolve to take things slowly. He promptly cut himself off from access to his daydreams, but Rose caught him by surprise. She shoved him back with more force than she’d ever used on him, leaving him bewildered for a moment as he stared at her awaiting explanation, panting for breath and trying to wrestle his wildly out-of-control imagination into submission.

She pushed his shoulder with one hand as she collided with him, rolling him onto his back across the cushions. Before he could react she had rolled on top of him, her legs straddling his hips as she laid across his chest, pulling him in by the collar for another kiss. A rush of pleasure and adrenaline prevented him from making any wise decisions to reverse her position. His hands slid under her shirt, caressed her bare back as he drew her closer to him. Mimicking his earlier tactic, she rolled her hips down onto his, but her position somehow made it even better than his attempts and ohh. She sighed into his mouth and it was the most beautiful sound he’d ever heard and he fought to maintain what sanity he had left.
He conceded this certainly wasn’t the most romantic way to start an intimate evening, but he considered it a product of two sets of consistently neglected physical needs. Neither of them attempted to advance the situation by unclasping bras or loosening ties. He knew his own reasons, but wasn’t 100 percent sure what was stopping Rose. Maybe she was nervous, too. It didn’t stop him from enjoying it. Before he could stop himself he was lifting his hips to meet hers as she continued to grind against him. Their mouths were forced to part to allow their breathy sighs to escape, hot upon each other’s lips though they weren’t moving together anymore. It was two well-timed thrusts later he called out her name, pressure starting to build from deep within. His hands crawled out from under her shirt and lifted to cradle her face, letting his fingers glide through her hair as his forehead came to rest against hers.

And with that she had made him forget exactly what he was fighting so hard to avoid. His walls came down as he surrendered to the pleasure, and he saw it before she did. Flickers, static. Easily discernable nonetheless. His granddaughter, screaming and pleading for help from amidst ashes and smoke as Gallifrey blazed and crumbled around them. It was a recurring nightmare he hadn’t experienced for months, but somehow happened to be the moment that was sent through the connection first. He opened his eyes to find Rose staring wide-eyed at him, fear or concern or something else he couldn’t decipher in her eyes. The excitement drained from him in an instant. Ashamed and afraid, he quickly rolled her off of him, his hands leaving her to end any trace of physical contact that remained. He couldn’t explain. He didn’t want to talk about it, not tonight. He berated himself for allowing things to get so out of hand.

“Rose, I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I can’t,” he said swiftly as he turned from her and rose from the couch. He ran both his hands across his face in anxiety as he deliberated a moment. “Just… give me a bit,” he said, and left the room without another glance at her.

Guilt washed over him for leaving so abruptly and without justification before he had even crossed the door frame. But he just needed a few minutes to cool down. His hearts still thrashed wildly in his chest, and his physiology was still… excited, despite his mental state having suddenly crashed and burned. He also had to think of how to even begin to discuss this with Rose. He cursed whoever idea it was to keep the conscious and subconscious brain wavelengths separate as he made his way to his seldom-used room, as it was closer than either the console or the library, and collapsed dramatically onto the bed.

If he knew Rose, then she probably wasn’t terribly upset by what just happened. He ventured she may actually want to just talk and offer her comfort. But therein was the crux of the problem. He managed to tell her the gist of the information about the telepathy, but neglected to mention the extent of his lack of control over it in intimate circumstances. She also didn’t know about his family. She wouldn’t have recognized the face she saw or known that it held particular meaning to him. How could he inform her of something so monumental, so late in their relationship? Those are the sort of things human couples tell each other straightaway. Human couples. He scoffed again, rolling his eyes in exasperation at no one but himself.

There was of course a selfishly positive side to this. He didn’t remember having that much fun or receiving so much satisfaction from sex before. Not that they even got that far, technically. But, then, he hadn’t had that degree of intimate contact with a human in a long time. And never in a body quite this young before, maybe it was that. Or perhaps Rose’s hormonal triggers and excitement drifted to his mind through a sort of hazy, one-sided link even before he let his guard down, so that he didn’t even notice. Regardless, those brief minutes surrounded by her were probably among the best minutes he ever spent, and that was saying something coming from a man who’s lived the better part of a millennium.

Even in that moment he considered leaping from the bed to return to her, despite what had sent him
flying from the room, to just ignore whatever spewed from his subconscious and continue where they left off. Her silky skin warm beneath his, hearing her soft cries between passionate kisses, exploring her curves with his fingertips, discovering all the ways he could make her call out his name. That appealed to him more than journeying to the furthest stretches of the universe. Ironically, he used his habit of flinging them across galaxies and through millions of years as a distraction from exactly that fact. Though it rarely worked. It’s not as though she was less charming on a foreign planet or a far-removed era than she was at the Powell Estate or in the TARDIS.

Since the night she stepped into the TARDIS with the intention of staying, he resisted any and all temptation, and all this time he thought it was for the best. He often thought she mustn’t be attracted to him or she would have made a pass at him. Other humans certainly seemed to often enough in this incarnation. But more and more the realization sunk in that Rose would never have attempted to explicitly flirt with or otherwise objectify him. He recalled Cassandra doing so from within her own body, and when he did, he deduced very quickly that Rose wasn’t herself. She wasn’t the type. Instinctually he knew Rose cared deeply for him, and certainly that level of affection could inspire physical attraction. It was clear to both of them separately, and it seemed most people they met, that the two of them were more than just mates. And yet, they weren’t, because month after month he refused to ask her for more, failed to pick up on her cues, and neglected to discuss the undeniable magnetism between them, electing instead to ignore and suppress it.

All of it stemmed from his dread of sharing his secrets with her, allowing her to see the repressed memories and darkness that would be disinterred were they to consummate their relationship. Which frightened him, beyond a shadow of a doubt; he had never revealed how haunted he truly was to anyone, and there was the very real possibility she would be scarred by the sight of it. Early that morning he convinced himself he could open himself to her slowly, gradually, until one day he was prepared to offer everything to her, and he imagined in an idealized fashion how they could come together effortlessly.

What he hadn’t anticipated was finding any form of restraint completely evaded him in the heat of passion; their romantic moment on the couch escalated within minutes from gentle kisses to a desperate tangle of limbs and friction. Nor had he properly prepared himself to watch Rose experience even a brief clip from his archives of grief. As an abstract concept, it seemed manageable enough; the actualization of the event was another thing entirely, and it had immediately driven him to flee her presence. Both of these new bits of information made him second-guess his decision. Lack of self-control would thwart this process from remaining slow and steady as he desired it. He had to better prepare himself next time for whatever Rose might encounter in the depths of his soul, so they could work through it together. That is, if what she saw didn’t send her bolting out the TARDIS doors back to her mum, never looking back at the broken alien she left behind. But if she did, he wouldn’t blame her, nor try to stop her.

But somehow, he didn’t think she would. She had already jeopardized everything else important to her to rescue him before; he could hardly think of a better way she could have proven her love. He admitted it was difficult for him to even think the word to himself, and he couldn’t comprehend how she could love the pile of damaged goods that he was, incapable of even communicating his sentiments. Nonetheless, he had always suspected she loved him in a platonic way, though only recently discovered there was an unmistakable romantic component involved. Both of these varieties of love he reciprocated. But, strangled by insecurity and cowardice, made a daily habit of holding his tongue when his hearts yearned to tell her those three words always echoing in the back of his mind.

As though on cue, Rose cleared her throat from across the room. His head shot up to see her standing in the doorway, hesitant to enter and poised to make a speedy escape.

“You okay?” she asked, shuffling her feet anxiously. He sat up and came to the edge of the bed.
“Yeah,” he said, unconvincingly, he thought, as he motioned for her to join him. She promptly accepted and crossed the room to sit on the bed, careful to leave plenty of distance between them.

“I’m sorry –” they both began in unison as they turned to one another, and cut themselves off on hearing their words duplicated.

“You’re sorry?” he asked, thoroughly confused. “What for?”

“Well, y’know, I got a bit... carried away,” she answered, her eyes refusing to meet his as they darted around the room nervously.

“Rose, please. Don’t apologize. It takes two to... merengue? Wait, no, that’s not right. What’s that Earth saying?” he floundered to lighten the mood.

“Tango?” she offered, unsure if they were thinking of the same idiom.

“That’s it,” he nodded with a smile at her. “Anyway, it was just as much me as it was you.” She nodded, looking to the ground rather than returning his stare as he strained to form more words to explain. There was shyness in her posture, but no signs of anger or disgust.

“Doctor, about what happened,” she started again, finally looking him square in the eyes. He took a deep breath in preparation before he could keep the dramatic action in check, and she halted mid-sentence. Nerves wrinkled at his stomach until he felt sick, petrified of what she might ask. She frowned slightly as she changed course. “Do you want to talk about it?”

Immediately relief flooded through him at her choice of question, and immediately he was guilty for feeling it. He didn’t reply, certain that a resounding ‘no’ was too harsh for the delicacy of the situation. Neither could he say yes and stay honest with her. One corner of his mouth turned down as his eyes pleaded for forgiveness.

“O-kay,” she replied, strength in her voice but clearly fighting to suppress secondary emotions. “D’you want me to leave?” she asked, despondency creeping into her tone.

“No,” he answered quickly, squeezing his eyes shut as his hand ran over his face in frustration at himself. He couldn’t lose her presence even for a few hours, and yet couldn’t provide what she needed. Could he ever? “No, I don’t,” he repeated with more composure. He could at the very least address the concern he knew was brewing in her mind regarding rejection. The same emotion that would be overwhelming him if the situation was reversed.

“I’m sorry,” he said earnestly, shifting his hand under hers so he could raise it to his lips for a moment. She gave him a weak smile. “I’ll tell you more, Rose. I just... we need to take it slow, like I said. Probably shouldn’t let things get... heated like that again.” He hated himself for saying it. Because of the look in her eyes. Because of how much he wanted ‘things’ to get heated again. But slow wasn’t saying never. He swore to himself in that moment to make progress on this mission with
each passing day.

“Ok, I understand. Fair enough,” she said softly.

“But, that doesn’t mean stopping everything, I mean, I think that… well, kissing itself isn’t too heated,” he added, hoping it could make the smile return to lighten her features again.

“Yeah?” she asked, a trace of exactly what he was looking for around the edges of her mouth.

“Yeah, I think it would be perfectly acceptable,” he continued as he scooted across the bed to close the gap between them. He searched her eyes for permission as he leaned his head toward hers, and she gave it in the form of a full smile. He brought his mouth to hers, and she grinned against his lips for a moment before parting them to return the kiss. They both helped ensure it was chaste enough, hands dutifully avoided brushing through hair or wandering across bared skin, neither tongue dared to cross the other’s lips. He broke the kiss as his thoughts began to drift to earlier events mingled with recurring fantasies, not taking any chances.

“See? Completely cool. No heat at all,” he joked, hoping she understood.

“Yep. ‘S like a refrigerator in here,” she quipped, returning his smile.

“So… want to finish that movie?” he asked, knowing any other activity would facilitate distracting both their minds from the impulsive desires that could drive them to pounce on each other a second time.

“Sure, yeah,” she replied, taking his hand and standing up to lead them both from his room.

The moment they had returned to the couch she snuggled against him, resting her head against his chest as his arm wrapped around her shoulder to pull her closer. The atmosphere between them became tangibly more relaxed as they watched Belle and The Beast dance across the screen. Occasionally he would gently tilt her chin up as he brought his head down to meet hers for another kiss, unable to resist her delectable lips now that he was familiar with their taste. He tried to ignore the heat that scorched from behind his lips and spread like fire through his veins as his hearts crashed against his chest, tried to ignore the throbbing sensation between his legs at even this innocent interaction. He failed thoroughly at both.

It wasn’t until the credits began to roll that she was the one to initiate contact, turning her head to softly touch her lips against his neck just where his skin met the collar of his shirt. He couldn’t stop from trembling at the novel sensation; his breathing became jagged as her lips continued to travel towards his jaw. Her tongue lightly brushed his skin from between her lips to tease him, as his head sank into the back of the couch in resignation to the delightful shivers it sent down his spine. By the time her mouth finally found his he was desperate for it, and suddenly understood the intensity he received earlier from Rose after his lips had lingered at her neck. Impulsively his arms wrapped around her, his hands splayed across her back as he pulled her against him, and slowly, unthinkingly he began to lean her back to let them both roll onto the couch, imagining easier access to, well, everywhere. And that’s when she stopped him, her hands pushing his shoulders back gently but with enough force that he didn’t dare disregard it. She cleared her throat and eyed him seriously, a small smirk emerging.

“Right, yes… thanks,” he managed to say, running a hand through his hair and smiling awkwardly at her. He unwound himself from her and sat back against the couch, breathing out an exaggerated sigh.

“So, remind me, how far in the future is the last Harry Potter book?” she asked. Bless her for
changing the subject.

“Uhm, about a year. Why?”

“Was thinkin’ of takin’ you up on that offer, after all.”

“Well, you’re in luck. I actually already picked it up.”

“What?”

“Yeah. It was the same night, actually. I just made quick trip while you were asleep in case you changed your mind.”

“I see,” she smiled, tongue and all. “Can I read it now?” she asked. A perfect distraction.

“Course you can,” he said, scooting off the couch. “C’mon, then.” She jumped off the couch and ran around him, he guessed in the direction of the library. He was at her heels in a moment, a slow jog enough to keep up with her as her feet pounded down the grating of the hall.

“Thought you hated running?” he called to her. She didn’t answer until they’d crossed the threshold of the library.

“Only when we’re runnin’ from something that’s tryin’ to kill us,” she panted.

Rose settled into her favorite chair with the final installment of the boy wizard’s adventures, and the Doctor decided to grab an instructional manual of sorts on relationships he never thought he would read in all his thirteen lives. He stuck with the Gallifreyan edition, since he’d deprogrammed it from the TARDIS’ translation options on the off chance Rose ever saw his randomly scribbled notes or the names etched in the console. With a wave of his hand, he said it was his favorite volume of quantum mechanics from the 60th century of a planet whose name he actually made up. Why did he even make it up? He knew the names of thousands of actual planets he could have said. He really astounded himself with his absurdity sometimes.

There wasn’t even anything useful in the book. Of course, it was written by a Time Lord. For other Time Lords. It was all about ‘sharing is caring,’ and he already knew that. In fact, it was the root of his problem. It didn’t exactly cover human-Time Lord relationships, as they weren’t all that popular. In some cases, they were even frowned upon. Though, that was only by the likes of Rassilon and his minions… he shuddered.

“You alright?” Rose asked. It must have been more noticeable than he thought.

“Yeah, just, they got one of these equations wrong,” he lied. Rose just shook her head and chuckled, quickly returning to her text.

On second thought, he supposed the same basic principles would apply. He could just, well, modify the advice to account for Rose’s lack of innate telepathic and sensory capabilities. Quickly flipping through all the chapters on courtship, he found nothing useful that he didn’t already know. He skipped to honesty, but that was just more guilt piled on him that he hadn’t already been truthful about everything with her. He allowed himself a peek at a chapter focused on sex, and one sentence stuck in his mind amidst a plethora of both psychic and positional tips: Don’t invite temptation if one or both of you isn’t ready. He was already quite familiar with the consequences of that. The problem was: Rose was irresistible. Literally irresistible, as in, he couldn’t resist acquiescing to anything she asked him for, evidently. He resigned himself to the fact that he would simply have to deal with that problem, but the quote would be nagging him for weeks, he was sure.
Soon he was both bored and frustrated with advice-seeking and wandered off in search of something else to occupy his mind and hands. When Rose emerged from the fictional universe she’d been engulfed in a few hours later, she found him on the floor in the lab, surrounded by wires and blueprints and electronics as he worked on the latest prototype of a sonic screwdriver that could function on wood. He was having no luck.

“So, how far’d you get?” he asked as he cautiously untangled himself from the mess he’d created without stepping on anything breakable.

“I think about a quarter through. ‘S really good so far.”

“Yeah, it is. Gets a bit sad though.”

“Oi, no spoilin’ it!”

“Sorry!” he ducked away from her swatting hand.

Rose only had to mention she might be a little hungry, and the Doctor was whipping up some of his famous eggs Florentine with bacon and sourdough. They ate standing in the kitchen, plates in hand, as they tended to do when they’d waited too long between meals. Rose quickly became sleepy as they cleaned up; he teased her for yawning five times while she dried the wet dishes he handed to her and she claimed it was from eating too much bread.

Against his better judgment, he didn’t put up an ounce of a fight when she asked him if they could watch a film until she fell asleep. Like he said, irresistible. So, they ended up on the couch in front of the television again once Rose had finished her nightly hygienic routine. He slipped her next request, *Back to the Future*, in the player, and she had to explain just what she meant by ‘you can be the big spoon’ before he climbed onto the couch with her. Her exhausted innocence eased his anxiety; for a few minutes he could just hold her without thinking of what was ahead of them. She fell asleep in his arms before Marty landed in the 1950s.
Alright, so, fair warning: superfluous fluff ahead. Because, hmm... you're going to need as much fluff as you can get. And it was definitely time to leave the TARDIS for a bit. And what do these two do better than have fun together? Am I right?

There is one line that I deliberated over deleting for many, many painstaking minutes because I couldn't decide if it would be OOC or not. If you think you know which line I'm talking about, don't hesitate to drop me a line saying whether you agree I should have kept it in or want to yell at me for it. I think I can take it. Maybe.

Slight spoiler: In case you are curious what exactly those *things* look like, check out this reference:

Lastly, I'd really love feedback on this chapter. It was a blast to write and I'm curious what you all think. Much love!

Rose woke to an empty couch and a chill, as she had only used the Doctor for a blanket through the night. She didn’t know when he’d gone, but she felt rested enough that it was probably morning by now. After a slow, languished stretch across the couch that made her groan louder than she intended, she got up creakily to seek him out.

“Good morning!” the Doctor exclaimed as she entered the console, leaping from the jumpseat and already starting to throw switches. “Gonna have to make a quick detour on the way to Athens.”

“What, you think they’re alien?” she asked, nearly slipping as she climbed onto the vacated spot on the jumpseat as he worked.

“Could be,” he shrugged. “Normally fish wouldn’t scare off tourists.” Just the possibility was enough to spur him on, like it was his job to investigate anything potentially extra-terrestrial.

“But what about ‘let history takes its course’?” she asked, quoting his former self with a terrible attempt at a northern accent. “Thought you wanted humanity to just deal with aliens on their own?”

“Okay, okay.” He halted manipulation of the controls and walked the short steps to the chair where he could look her in the eyes. “First of all, I’m offended by that impression of me, if that’s what it was supposed to be, because I never sounded like that. Second, that didn’t work out well with the Slitheen incident, did it?” She shuddered at the memory of the hideous and violent green monsters and shook her head lightly. “Exactly. I’m just gonna check they’re not hostile. And if they are? Well, those ecologists are gonna need our help,” he smiled and nudged her elbow, as though she would actually be any help if they found hostile fish-aliens. “And third, Rose Tyler, your hair is looking
fantastic this morning.” The sarcastic twat.

“Oi, shut it, just because your hair looks perfect no matter what – ” she stopped herself. “I mean, you didn’t just roll off the couch, did you? Now stop harassin’ me and get flyin’ while I go and change.” she motioned him back to the console as she jumped off the seat.

“Oh yes!” he shouted as she shuffled to the corridor. “Leave the trousers behind, Rose, you won’t be needing them!” She knew he didn’t realize how that sounded. She also knew he meant for her to choose shorts instead. But she couldn’t help but chuckle at the strange, naïve irony of his statement.

The TARDIS tugged the floor under her feet in departure before she reached her room. It wasn’t that she’d never seen an ocean before, or that she’d never been to L.A. before, but she’d never been on a beach in L.A. before, and certainly not with the Doctor. Despite the small voice reminding her this was only a pit stop and could result in another flight for their lives depending on what they found, she was already more excited for this impromptu vacation than she had been for the vastly different adventure back thousands of years to Greece. And intrigued at the thought of seeing the Doctor in such a non-Doctorish setting. She absently wondered about what he planned to wear as she discovered that the TARDIS had already generated a closetful of attire suitable for sunny weather on her arrival.

Jumping in the seawater wasn’t on her to-do list, but with the Doctor’s spontaneity and unpredictable hobbies, she couldn’t rule out being dragged along into the water if it were to happen. She replaced her knickers and bra with a TARDIS blue bikini she thought he’d fancy, if given the opportunity to see it. She covered the swimsuit with a pair of knee-length denim shorts, a white camisole, and lavender v-neck as the TARDIS groaned and lurched out its landing. She strolled into her bathroom to find that her hair was truly a sleep-induced disaster. She fixed it up as best she could before getting it out of her face into a messy bun, washed her face with cold water to wake herself up, and hastily applied just a bit of make-up around the eyes, because she’d look exhausted without it at this hour. She considered abandoning the shirt altogether, but was unsure just how warm the weather would be. She snatched a pair of identically colored lavender sandals before heading out to find The Doctor again.

“Doctor, just how hot is it going to – ” she began, hoping to get an answer regarding the temperature, but the rest of the sentence was lost on her tongue as she was stopped in her tracks on seeing the Doctor waiting near the door.

“Oh… my… god,” she breathed, softly enough that if he had only human ears he wouldn’t have heard. She wondered if he planned on changing, but somehow never expected to walk out and see him like this.

“Oi, don’t insult the outfit,” he retorted as she slowly walked down the ramp, drinking in the sight of the man in front of her. His complexion was unchanged, hair still gloriously tousled, the sideburns she’d come to love intact, familiar specs rimmed his offended eyes. But gone were the modest brown suit, tie, and trainers; in their place was a pair of brownish sandals, TARDIS blue swim trunks, and a white button-up shirt, collar and several buttons open. It was like an Oxford but lacked the crispness, made from a softer, crinkly-looking material, the originally long sleeves rolled up to his elbows.

“The TARDIS picked this out special for me. Got a problem, take it up with her,” he nodded to the console. That explained perfectly their now matching swimwear.

“No, ‘m not laughin’,” she explained, trying to tone down the smile his appearance was compelling from her. “It suits you. And I think you’re gonna blend in. Well, aside from the skin tone, at least.”

“Yeah, not much I can do about that, I’m afraid,” he replied, examining his arm in a sort of somber
acceptance of that fact. “Least you’re not very tanned, either. Won’t look as strange with the pair of us reflecting the sun.”

“Oi!” she pushed his shoulder lightly. “I have a lovely peach complexion that does not reflect the sun, thanks. Although, probably should bring some sunscreen. D’you have any?” she asked.

“Ooo, not sure,” he frowned. “Don’t need it. The TARDIS can probably whip some up though.”

“You don’t need it? Not ever?” He shook his head.

“DNA doesn’t have the same susceptibility to damage from ultraviolet radiation. So there’s no need for the melanin skin darkening system. We’ve got different pigments, but the skin color you’ve got is the one you’ll have for life, or at least, that regeneration. Let’s see, probably titanium dioxide, avobenzone, some non-toxic organic solvent, probably ethanol, water, maybe some oils…”

“Ok, then” she nearly interrupted, not wanting to dwell on yet another bit of information that made his species superior or for him to waste ten minutes listing all the ingredients in sunblock. “Where? How?”

“Oh, she already started making it once I’d mentioned it,” he told her with a toothy grin. “You see!” he exclaimed, dashing back up the ramp to the console only to stop and stare at a piece of it that seemed to contain nothing at all. By the time she reached him, though, a hidden compartment was rising from the inconspicuous section to reveal a pocket that contained a small white squeeze bottle. This presumably contained the sunscreen they only started talking about thirty seconds before. She shook her head incredulously, dumbfounded by this ship even more than he was.

“Brilliant,” he beamed as he handed the bottle to her.

“Thanks,” she couldn’t resist returning the contagious grin. It was small enough to fit in her pocket, so she stashed it there to apply later, hoping she wouldn’t regret the decision to not put it on that moment.

“Oh! I forgot!” she cried, darting back towards the hall without explaining what she’d forgotten. It was the white designer sunglasses the TARDIS had somehow managed to acquire, or fashion, she wasn’t sure which. The Doctor waited patiently where he had been before she left when she returned, shades in hand.

“Oh, that reminds me,” he said as he eyed the object in her grasp. He took off his specs and pulled the sonic from a pocket in the trunks she hadn’t realized they had. He whirred the sonic in front of the lenses for a few seconds and watched as they darkened to approximately the shade hers were. He returned the now-sunglasses to his face and now all he needed was a volleyball or a mobile to his ear to replicate a leaked image of Hollywood celebrity.

“So, how far back is this?” she asked as they stepped out into the welcoming sun. It shone brightly against a bright blue sky, but the temperature couldn’t have been more than twenty-five, twenty-six degrees.

“About three days,” he replied as the door closed behind them.

“Niiicccceee,” a half-naked blur shouted as he passed on a skateboard, holding a hand out to the Doctor, apparently for a high-five. The Doctor responded hardly in time, and only managed to lightly skim the young man’s hand before he was out of reach again.

“What?” he questioned as he turned to her, expression as confused as hers felt.
“No idea,” she answered, staring after the almost-brown shirtless bloke she guessed couldn’t have been more than twenty.

“How long you guys been in there?” a different male voice to their left asked, prompting a chorus of laughter from the group of five they found seated around a table on the outskirts of a restaurant patio off the street. Suddenly she understood.

“Oh… um…” The Doctor floundered to fabricate an explanation for their emergence from the TARDIS, but it was clear he hadn’t picked up on the subtext and was only concerned they may be suspicious of their mode of transportation. Rose couldn’t watch anyone poke fun at the Doctor without at least attempting to stick up for him, especially when he so naively missed their point that he was probably about to make a fool of himself.

“Long enough, mate,” she called to the group of diners, tipping her glasses for a quick wink at the speaker before turning to the Doctor.

“Don’t worry about it,” she said in a much more hushed tone. “Let’s go.” Sure enough, the table was silent following her quick repartee. The Doctor stared after them even against the tug of her arm on his along the semi-crowded street, still blatantly puzzled by every word anyone had spoken.

“Rose, I don’t understand,” he began, perplexed, his furrowed brow evident even through the tinted specs. “They shouldn’t have seen us land. I knew there would be pedestrian traffic on the streets so I equipped the TARDIS exterior with a perception filter while she was landing. Us walking out deactivated it but – ” he paused at the sight of Rose putting a hand to her forehead and pulling her bottom lip into her mouth in embarrassment. “What?” What is it? And why aren’t you more concerned about this? What’s happened?” he interrogated, stopping them both walking as he took off the shades to unleash the intensity of his information-harvesting stare; one that she quickly surrendered to.

“They were… they both were… implyin’ that we, y’know…” she trailed off, nodding as suggestively as possible back towards the TARDIS.

“Ohhh,” he dragged out the word as his eyes widened with surprise, then slowly glazed over as he thought back over the last couple of minutes.

“Oh!” he growled, angrier this time. “Well, that was inappropriate!” he scolded her as he grasped the innuendo. His mouth hung open in shock as though she’d actually affronted him with the benign comment.

“Doctor, I wasn’t serious. And neither were they, blokes my age like to kid ‘round, look cool in front of their friends. I was just tryin’ to beat ‘em at their own game.”

“But – ”

“Oi, it shut ‘em up, didn’t it? You should be thankin’ me.” The crease in his forehead persisted as he glared at her in disagreement.

“Ok, don’t thank me,” she amended. “I was only jokin’. ‘M sorry if I offended you,” she apologized earnestly, all traces of humor gone.

“Joking? Blimey, it’s like Captain Jack all over again!” his expression had softened a bit, but his tone still indicated he’d been insulted. “Really, did he teach you that one?”

“Doctor?” she pleaded, reaching out to stroke his forearm in persuasion.
“Alright, alright,” he caved quickly at the unfamiliar touch of skin that was rarely exposed. “You’re forgiven. Let’s move on, shall we?” He restored the sunglasses to their rightful place and took her hand to walk in the direction opposite the inquisitive table.

They walked along the sidewalk of a small but busy road, shops and restaurants lining either side of the street, full car parks scattered in between. It seemed every vehicle that passed to their left was a slick, shiny, and expensive one: Lexus, BMW, Mercedes, Audi… in an endless line of black, gray, and white that she soon tired of admiring. One orange Lamborghini, one silver Maserati, and one red Porsche left her gaping after the sleek paint and purring engines.

“Oh, Rose, those silly cars have nothing on our mode of transport,” he grumbled as he watched her ogle after the third. “The TARDIS would be offended.” No, she wouldn’t. But clearly, he was offended on her behalf.

“M sorry,” she replied quickly, taking her eyes off the road. “Just not used to seein’ so many posh cars at once.”

“L.A. has its share of wealthy people. Lots of celebrities… though, technically we aren’t in Los Angeles. We’re in Malibu. Still, L.A.’s maybe, um, forty kilometers back,” he pointed in the supposed direction of the city with his thumb, but she couldn’t care less about the name of the city. Not as the sun warmed her face, a light breeze kept her skin cool, the soothing sound of flocks of seagulls cawed at intervals, and she tasted fresh, salty air on her tongue.

“What time is it here?” she asked.

“About half past noon,” he answered. “No use coming to California if it’s not good and sunny, right?” he bumped his shoulder into hers playfully. She chuckled as she looked over to him again, still jarred by the sight of the shorts, rolled-up shirt, and sandal-clad feet. He only ever unbuttoned his collar so much when they were alone on the TARDIS; it was unusual (and though she’d never tell him) a bit exciting to see his shirt so casually strewn open in public. She’d seen him without the usual pinstriped getup a few times; off the top of her head, she recalled Howard’s sleepwear on the day the Sycorax invaded and the ridiculous toga when she got trapped in Rome as a statue. Occasionally she’d seen him nix the jacket and the tie, or kick off his shoes in the library or the telly room, but she’d never seen him in casual clothes even aboard the TARDIS. Any nights he did sleep it was after she’d already dozed off, and he certainly hadn’t done so in her company, not until recently. She had never been sure whether he wore pajamas to sleep often, if at all. After several minutes of sandals flopping on the cement, dodging cars in crosswalks, and the Doctor randomly swinging their linked hands back and forth, she decided she quite fancied the beachy look, perhaps even enough to ask him to expand his typical wardrobe a bit.

“How much farther? I still can’t even see the water,” she didn’t mean it to sound like a complaint, but her impatience to reach the shore may have tainted it as such.

“It’s just this main road to cross, then through that walkway there and we’re there.” He pressed the button on a metal rod in the concrete that would give them a signal to cross soon. To their right was a sign labeling the large cluster of retail and food establishments as “Malibu Country Mart.” She nodded in affirmation of The Doctor’s earlier statement, though she hadn’t doubted his knowledge of their precise location.

“Couldn’t we have just parked a bit closer?” she asked as the red hand on the opposite end of the crosswalk changed to a white stick figure.

“Nah. Wanted to park away from the main road. And especially the sand, she might just sink right in.” She assumed the last comment was made in jest, as she never knew the TARDIS to be so
vulnerable.

She couldn’t complain about the walk; it was the most beautiful scenery she’d encountered on their Earth-grounded journeys so far, and the weather was much more desirable than the one they’d left in London the day before. The walkway he’d gestured to wound quickly to the left, and was backed by a row of unstable-looking houses raised by thin beams, presumably because they sat directly on the shoreline; they blocked any view of the sea they might otherwise have.

“So, what inspired the clothes?” she asked as they made their way down the rough dirt path.

“Told you, this was the TARDIS’ idea, not mine.”

“What about this?” she waved a finger in circles near his collarbone, indicating she meant why he decided to ditch the modesty.

“You mean the open collar?”

“S a little more than that.”

“Well, you did, Rose Tyler.” He added the extra emphasis on the ahh that never failed to delight her. Nonetheless, she wasn’t sure how she had any input in his fashion choices.

“How d’you mean?”

“Hmm, I thought you might not remember.”

“It was just something you might have said, last night. When you were mostly asleep.”

“What? What did I say?”

“Just that… you liked the buttons open.” She groaned. There went her no-longer secret. She recalled thinking it as her head nestled into that open space at some point after the movie credits had rolled the night before, but never saying it aloud.

“Ok, whatever. ‘S out in the open. I like it. Y’might say it’s… a little bit foxy,” she teased.

“Oh, I can’t believe you haven’t forgotten that yet,” he griped, spirits dashed in an instant.

“Doctor, I am never gonna forget that.”

“Fine then, we’ll call it even. Just, don’t… do any more,” he commanded, holding up his index finger in warning.

“Yes, sir,” she complied sarcastically, at just the moment the trail veered right to pass between thick, brownish-green brush. On rounding the corner she’d forgotten the brief embarrassment as the Pacific came into view at last. The Doctor slipped off his sandals and held them in his hand as the dirt path under their feet turned to soft sand. The expanse of water was a million shades of blue and turquoise, wrinkles of blinding light glinting off in a column beneath where the sun stood in the sky. Small waves lapped at the strip of wet sand and white foam, gentle crashes alternating with the constant ripple of the water over rough sand as the water retreated. The beige-tinted sand was covered in footprints and seagull marks, but the beach was barely populated; to the right stood the houses that had blocked their view before, and as far as her eyes could see to the left were maybe 100 people scattered across the sand with blankets and umbrellas. Which reminded her that they’d forgotten
“I can see why you picked this beach, ‘s empty,” she said, just as her sandal caught between a soft pile of sand and her foot, nearly tripping her to faceplant the sand if she hadn’t caught herself with one arm.

“Why d’you think I took these off?” the Doctor asked, holding up his own. It had been a bit of a task to trudge through the soft, lumpy stuff with her sandals sinking in and the grains scraping the skin of her foot against the soles. She followed the Doctor’s lead, and the walking that was bordering on challenging was now quite enjoyable, the warm, fluffy sand hugging her feet as they sank in with each step. “But yes, that’s one reason I chose this one. But mainly, because this is where the first creature was spotted, or at least reported. At about 3pm today.” The last fact was spoken in a whisper. She’d nearly forgotten the reason they came.

“Where do we even start looking?” she asked, overwhelmed by the vast coastline that stretched both directions.

“We’ll just walk along the water. See if we spot anything unusual.” Just as he spoke the mounds of dry sand beneath her feet turned to the cold, wet mush created by the ebb and flow of the waves. She laughed as the sandy mud squished between her toes and stared after the fleeting footprints they left in the malleable brown surface.

“What, have you never been to a beach before?” he asked, noting how she seemed transfixed on damp sand.

“No, ‘s just… been a while,” she admitted. Years. Maybe a decade. “We don’t really get out to the coast very often. I forgot how fun this is.”

“I know. Brilliant, isn’t it?” he agreed, wiggling his toes. He led them in a diagonal line closer to the water as they began to wander left, to the open shore uninhibited by the private plots of sand to the right. Just as the cold, frothy water blanketed the tops of her feet, they adjusted to walk parallel to the flow of the water, both uninterested in dipping in any further.

“This feels so weird,” she giggled as the water tugged at the sand as it receded and tickled her feet.

“Just how long has it been, Rose?” he said in between laughs.

“I dunno. Nine, ten years?”

“Blimey. We needed this trip more than I’d planned. Well, we’ve come to the right place for a picturesque beach. Only thing it’s missing is the surfers. Tide’s a bit low here. There might be more down the road, maybe twenty-five kilometers, the waves are bigger, so it’s more popular for water sports. Maybe we can pop over later. Or, better yet, skip ahead a few days until high tide.”

“How many times have you been here?” she asked, winded by his intimate knowledge of the surrounding area.

“Oh, no, I just did my research this morning. You know, to pick out the right spot, that sort of thing.”

“Have you ever done it? Surfin’, I mean.” Whatever he replied, it was lost to her ears as something furry brushed against her ankle with the water, stopping her cold. Fearful, she glanced down to see the offending object, hoping it was seaweed or a lost item of clothing. Instead she found an off-white cross between a crab and a lobster, but with large, furry pincers unlike any seafood she’d ever seen.

“Doctor,” she called, willing the panic down. He had stopped moving with her, but continued in
whatever story he was telling she couldn’t bring herself to comprehend.

“DOCTOR,” she called again, and this time he turned to her with alarm. “What do those things look like?” she asked.

“From the image in the press release they were yellowish white, crustacean-looking things—” he caught sight of the creature as she pointed to what he described, as it began to drift back out to sea as the tide pulled out.

“Hah!” he exclaimed excitedly. “Ok, just, keep calm, don’t attract attention to it. And don’t touch it until I know what it is,” he warned.

“Too late,” she told him. “’S already touched my leg.”

“It doesn’t itch or sting, does it?”

“No,” she answered, truthfully feeling no ill effects from the brief contact with the freakish thing.

“Ok. You feel anything strange, it’s straight back to the TARDIS.” He took a couple cautious steps into the water towards the creature, squatting to take a closer look. She followed suit and bent to observe it across from him. He removed the tinted glasses and pulled the sonic from the pocket of his shorts and waved it methodically in a pattern only inches above its flesh. Its legs, the fury appendages, and the antenna-like projections near what she guessed was its mouth were still despite the constant flow of the tide over its body.

“Oh, you are beautiful,” the Doctor whispered in admiration as he examined the creature.

“Not poisonous,” he soon concluded, stroking the unusual white fur with a couple fingers. “And, unfortunately, also dead,” he announced, confirming her suspicions of its lifeless state. She tentatively reached out a hand to touch the small white body, still a bit frightened by the sight of the hairs.

“I’m sorry, little one,” he addressed it again. “But, it’s also from Earth. Nothing alien about it. Just hasn’t been discovered yet. Based on the fact it only has these shrunken eyes, and no pigments in them, it’s probably blind. Millions of chemosynthetic bacteria on these hairs.” (She pulled her hand away with a cringe.) “Yellow on the claws might indicate contact with sulfur. My guess is it normally lives at the bottom of the ocean near hydrothermal vents. So what’s it doing up here?” he wondered aloud, playing with his tongue as he speculated. “And why do dozens of them start washing up on the beach in a few hours? What’s causing them to die?” He squinted through the sunlight at her, pursuing an answer to any of those vital questions.

“Maybe some sort of toxin, people dumpin’ garbage or chemicals in the water?”

“Could be,” he acknowledged, bowing his head as he considered it further. “Would have to be industrial in scale, and sudden…but it wouldn’t explain why the effects were only felt by one species.” He ran a hand roughly through his hair in frustration, and she couldn’t help but wonder how the freshly ruffled look this created would be detrimental to their ‘no, we swear we didn’t just shag’ case.

“Also, how’d they end up on the surface, if you said they normally live on the ocean floor?”

“I don’t know that either,” he groaned, standing and inhaling a dramatic breath so he could ponder overlooking the water. “Is something hunting them? A predator, a human? Some deep-sea earthquake frighten them to the surface?” he brainstormed aloud.
“But how could people be catchin’ things that deep?”

“You’re right, generally they can’t. But then, what’s happening to them?”

“How can we find out?” she asked, lacking additional hypotheses to share.

“Short of sinking to the bottom of the ocean, I’m not sure we can.”

“So, what, that’s it?”

“What? I’m not exactly an expert in lethal endemics among isolated deep-sea Earth species.”

“You’re right. Usually ’s more complicated than that.”

“But this isn’t alien interference. It’s not my place to intervene, I don’t think. I’m sure the ecologists will figure it out. Humans are brilliant.”

“How do you know ‘s not alien interference?” she insisted, not convinced by the little information they had regarding the strange mass deaths and relocation of the animals.

“It wouldn’t make any sense,” he explained. “For anything to attack an isolated species, and discreetly, at that. It’s probably a recently evolved pathogen or another invasive species wiping them out. Perhaps a vent died out and stopped supplying heat and nutrients, or exploded and killed a large population. Regardless, not a mystery we’re here to solve.” She supposed he was right; it was an issue out of their usual league.

“Can we go and see what happened in the future?”

“That’s always a bit risky, Rose.”

“What’re you worried I’m gonna do, go back, solve it myself, take the credit? I think you’re forgettin’ you’re the one who controls the time-travel machine.”

“Oi, careful,” he cautioned, irritation creasing his brow, glancing around to ensure no beachgoers heard her remarks. “Aright, then, you want to leave right now?” he asked, seeming to recognize she wouldn’t want to.

“No,” she admitted calmly, reversing the argumentative tone their conversation was taking on. “After we’ve had our fill of the sun, maybe. Shall we?” she extended a hand to him.

“Ok,” he hesitated briefly before taking it and smiling lightly. His disappointment that the furry lobster problem wasn’t one he was authorized to solve was palpable, despite making the decision not to get involved himself, free of external influence or threats to stop him if he did so.

“So, were you about to tell me a story about surfing?” she asked, recalling their interrupted conversation.

“Oh, right. Well, it was abut forty years ago, I was in Australia searching for a group of Sensorites that crash landed – ”

“MICHELE!” a woman suddenly shouted from a dozen yards away, ankle deep in the water and slowly treading further out. A casted arm rested in a sling across her chest. The Doctor immediately ran to her, water splashing at their clothes as he hauled Rose along with him by their linked hands.

“What is it? What’s wrong?” he asked urgently.
“It’s my daughter – I’ve been watching her, but I think she got caught in a rip tide, I don’t see her! I can’t swim with my arm!” The Doctor followed her gaze towards the water as her distress amplified while she explained. Seeing no one, the Doctor wheeled around in the direction of the lifeguard tower about 50 meters back, only to find the on-duty red-shorted bloke completely occupied chatting with a scantily clad woman about his age.

With an angry breath he turned to the sea again, giving Rose a brief glance of reassurance before dropping her hand to run to deeper water, and once the water reached his waist he was swimming. And quickly, considering how he went against the current. Just as he reached fairly still waters, past the origin of the small waves, she had to strain to see his head as he turned frantically searching for signs of movement. She looked on with anxiety when she also saw nothing, but gasped aloud when she saw a glimpse of a small arm and hand breach the surface, at the same moment the Doctor disappeared.

He re-emerged maybe fifteen agonizing seconds later, farther from shore but holding a small person in his arms. She watched the two heads drift parallel to the beach, the Doctor carrying them away from what must have been an undetectable current slowly without the use of both arms, before heading more quickly towards them.

“Do you know CPR?” he asked her mother when he was within range to ask without shouting, voice calm despite the implications behind the question. He’d found out months ago that Rose didn’t know.

“I - ” she stammered as the Doctor regained footing in the sand and ran from the water with the girl on his shoulder. By this time several strangers had wandered closer to Rose and the girl’s mum, looking on in concern as the Doctor repeated his question.

“Do you know CPR?!” he nearly shouted this time as he gently laid the girl on dry sand and knelt next to her. She wasn’t sure why he was asking; could only guess he didn’t want to cause her discomfort at the sight of a strange man resuscitating her daughter when she could have done it herself.

“No!” she cried, an anxious wreck at seeing her daughter unconscious. As soon as he’d heard, the Doctor’s fingers was pinching Michelle’s nose, his mouth was over her lips as he exhaled a deep breath into her lungs. And one was all it took before the girl came to life with a cough of spluttering saltwater, her eyes flying open as she gasped out a breath once the water had freed her airways. The Doctor stood and stepped out of the way so her mother could reunite with her. She continued to cough and wheeze for a bit, but after a few minutes her breathing evened out and she seemed to be without other injuries.

“Thank you. Thank you so much,” her mum cried as she hugged the girl. He replied with only a small bow of his head.

“So you alright, Michelle?” the Doctor asked. She nodded hesitantly, still shaken from the incident. She couldn’t have been older than seven or eight, too young for most kids to know how to swim well enough to dodge an unexpected current away from shore. Rose couldn’t help but think the mother slightly to blame for letting her out in the water alone.

“I know you’re very brave and adventurous, but be careful next time, alright?” he asked Michelle in a tone she’d never heard him use. “If the water’s up to your knees, that’s far enough. Don’t go out any more. Okay?” Sweet, encouraging. Like he’d had experience in a primary school classroom or babysitting before, but she couldn’t imagine such a scenario playing out in reality.

“Ok,” the girl agreed with another nod, the fear in her eyes diminishing as she drank in the Doctor’s
soothing voice. He motioned with one finger for her mum to stand and join him. He took her a
couple steps away from Michelle and muttered a few words, too quietly for Rose to hear. The
woman thanked him again and he turned back to Rose, who lingered several feet away during the
few rushed minutes it took the Doctor to rescue the girl, utterly helpless and afraid she would only
get in the way.

He walked the few short steps to her, shirt drenched and clinging to his skin, still dripping from his
hair and shorts, face wet and flushed. He shook his head and fluffed a hand through his hair wildly to
shake off excess droplets, many of which landed on her face.

“Oi, Doctor!” she called.

“Well, that was fun.” He bunched up the bottom of the shirt, attempting to squeeze out the water but
to no appreciable effect.

“’S like we can’t go anywhere without you savin’ someone’s life,” she pushed at his soaking chest
with one hand. “Guess it’s a good thing we came after all, even if it wasn’t for the… whatever they
are.”

“Yeah, looks like it. Though, I wouldn’t have had to if that incompetent lifeguard was doing his
job.” She followed his gaze to find the lifeguard in question still oblivious to the events of the last
few minutes.

“I’m gonna go have a word with him,” Rose declared. After a fresh wave of impotence and
inferiority washed over her from standing useless on the sideline while the Doctor saved the day
again, she was compelled to act. And one thing she prided herself on was her ability to rant at people
who’d done wrong by her. Before the Doctor’s outstretched arm could grasp her shoulder to pull her
back, she was marching across the sand toward the tower, ready to give the stupid bloke a piece of
her mind.

The Doctor didn’t follow, he walked a few steps behind her but lingered back, though as she glanced
back she saw he intended to watch the row unfold.

“Excuse me, sir,” she asked, politely to start, as she reached the tower, looking up at the lifeguard
and the obviously not-lifeguard teenager that stood opposite him, enthralling him, as it were.

“What’s up?” he said as he turned around and drooped his head lazily to look at her. He was tanned,
with blonde hair and chiseled abs, as she feared.

“Someone’s just had to do your job for ya, a little girl almost drowned while you were standin’ up
there not lookin’.”

“Oh,” his eyes raked over the beach stupidly. “Well I’m glad somebody else got my back,” he said
with a laugh, which elicited a similar sound from the girl, and turned away again.

“Oi!”

“Hey, Miss Britain,” he retorted back with a terrible attempt at her accent. “I’ve been here since five
this morning. I’m tired and having a nice conversation with this girl, and I didn’t see it. Sorry. If you
got a problem with me, go alert the queen.” She might’ve guessed he was pissed from the look in his
eyes and the drawl to his voice. Before she could stop herself, she was storming up the ramp to meet
him at his height, regulations be damned.

“Yeah, I do have a problem,” she chuffed. “Mate, this is your bloody job, y’can’t just stand up here
chattin’ with someone and not payin’ attention, people could die.”
“But it was just for a few minutes –”

“Oi, shut it!” Rose snapped, offended at the interruption. “A minute is all it takes, and you’re damn lucky there was someone else on this beach that knew how to swim and knew CPR. You shouldn’t’ve taken this job if you weren’t ready to do it right.”

“I’m just a little tired,” he repeated again.

“Tired! Oh, well, that’s a great excuse, why didn’t ya tell me before!?” she was yelling now. “Look, mate, if you’re too tired to come in to work and do your job properly, then find someone else to cover for ya. Or better yet, get a different job where maybe you won’t have to wake up before 5 in the mornin’, then you’ll have nothin’ to complain about! ‘Cause next time, the Doctor might not be there, and there’ll be no one to blame but yourself if someone dies on your watch!”

“Ok, fine,” he conceded, flipping a few locks of hair on his forehead from his face dramatically. “I get it, lady, chill out.”

“Well, good. And I’m gonna be watchin’,” she warned, pointing a finger at him. “If you’re slackin’ off again, I’m gonna find whoever’s in charge here and have you fired, straightaway.”

“Yeah, ok,” he remarked with sarcasm, raising his eyebrows as if to challenge her.

“I mean it.”

“Ok, you can get off my tower now,” he barked.

With a quick glance to the girl probably a couple years younger than she, as she had spoken nothing during their heated conversation either in defense of the bloke or to argue her own case, she headed back down the rickety wooden ramp to the sand. She was serious about keeping both eyes open for him goofing off or not keeping his eyes on the sea. Or at least on the tourists. She was gonna be checking.

“Looks like you’ve done a good job,” the Doctor congratulated her as she approached.

“What d’y mean?”

“Well, he’s sent away his bonnie-lass,” he said teasingly, nodding in the direction she’d come from. And to her surprise, she saw the girl walking away from the tower, towards the path they’d entered the beach from. She couldn’t help but smirk slightly out of pride.

“Good, hope he’s learned something,” she remarked simply, desiring a casual and not-at-all egotistical air in front of the Doctor.

“So, Rose,” he started, crossing his arms in front of his chest. “I can’t help noticing how very not wet you are.”

“You should get a medal or something,” she teased.

“I think we need to change that. It’s only fair,” he gestured to his clothes. They were no longer dripping with saltwater, but the sopping shirt still stuck against his skin. Sand coated his feet, ankles, and knees from when he knelt for emergency resuscitation, and his hair was dark with moisture and sticking out in all directions from the earlier ruffling and the wind.

“Y’know, you might as well take that shirt off, it’ll only start chafin’.”
“Oh, you’d like that, wouldn’t you? You stay all dry and clothed while I shed my wet clothes like some sort of beach escort? Oh…” he chuckled out the last word just as he moved briskly toward her with extended arms. She dodged him and took a few steps back, presuming he intended to pick her up and lug her to the water. He followed her steps with a devilish smile, confirming his intentions for her.

“Oh, what happened to your glasses?” she asked as a distraction, though she did wonder.

“Oh, right, I put them in my pocket – ” he reached into the right pocket of the shorts, and she only wondered a brief moment how that would have protected them from the ocean before she took off running in the opposite direction, or whatever you could call trampling across piles of sand that resisted every step. Immediately she could hear him kicking up the sand behind her, at her heels in only a few seconds. Damn those long, lean legs of his. Not that it wasn’t incredibly fun to be doing their trademark exercise together, but both her legs would soon fatigue from the unforgiving sand. She cut a path closer to the water to trade the dry sand for more easily trod wet stuff. In the process her toe caught on an unseen branch of dried seaweed, and through the stumble the Doctor caught her waist before her face could hit the sand, her feet leaving the ground as he easily hoisted her up. Though she didn’t exactly want to be thrown into the water with the outfit she quite liked, she dissolved into a fit of giggles as he carried her over his shoulder, deceptively strong for such a light frame.

He splashed through the water up to his waist before tossing her in without warning; she tumbled into the water clumsily and was fully submerged, her bum just scraping the sand before she kicked off and pushed back to the surface. She gasped as her face hit the air, chilled by the surprisingly cold water, the breeze only amplifying the sensation. The salty, sandy water burned her eyes; she blinked them furiously until she felt a couple tears wash away the debris. The Doctor’s accomplished smile was erased as he detected the few drops of water that didn’t come from the surrounding ocean.

“Oh… Rose, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to upset you, I was only – ” he sloshed cautiously over to where she stood, concerned and apologetic. She seized the opportunity he provided, a quick swipe of her leg against the back of his knees effectively destabilized his legs and knocked him backwards into the water, if only for a moment. His head barely disappeared beneath the surface before he shot back up, flipping his hair with a splash.

“Unbelievable. Trying to trick me with tears, eh? And I was only being a proper gentleman, checking up on you.”

“No, Doctor, the salt water really did start to burn my eyes, the tears were real just… for a different reason. I just took advantage of your vulnerability,” she smirked.

“Well, I will do no such thing. As a gentleman. Besides, you’re already as wet as I am. What I will do,” he took her hand from underwater and brought their linked hands above the surface as he started to walk them farther from shore. “Is teach you body surfing.”

“Body surfing?” she asked, skeptical.

“Yeah, it’s like surfing but with no board.”

“Well, I figured that. But how’s that surfin’? Isn’t that just, I dunno… drifting?”

“Was Buzz Lightyear flying or falling with style?”

“What’s with the Disney reference?” she laughed.
“Well, you picked Beauty and the Beast, I assumed you were a fan.”

“I’d say he was fallin’ with style.”

“Alright, fine. Spoil the fun. Today we’ll be drifting on waves.”

He turned them around and they walked until the water was up to her collarbone, though barely at his chest, and turned his head to examine the oncoming waves to choose the right one. They let several pass by, jumping at the right moment to let the swells drift under them.

“Oh, like I said, the waves aren’t very big today, but I think we can maybe catch one good one. Basically, all you’ve got to do is start swimming with the wave, and if you time it right, it’ll sort of just pick you up, carry you all the way to the sand. Trust me, it’s brilliant,” he added on seeing her lack of excitement. “Ok, ok, this one looks good. You ready?”

“Sure.”

But their first attempt didn’t turn out so well.

They both sank under the larger wave he’d chosen as soon as they started swimming.

“Aw,” the Doctor moaned as they resurfaced.

After a second and third attempt also concluding with waves washing over their heads, he was walking towards the shore in defeat.

“Givin’ up already?” Rose asked as she followed. “I think it’s the wet clothes, they’re weighin’ us down. That’s why we sunk. Think we’d have better luck with just the swimsuits.” He eyed her suspiciously before shaking out his hair again.

“Ok, then, you first,” he nodded at her.

“Doctor, why are you so shy all of a sudden?”

“It’s not that, I just don’t like being objectified.”

“D’you really think that’s the sort of woman I am?” she asked, affronted by his insinuation.

“And besides, there’s tons of tanned and very muscular blokes around,” he looked around to spot a few of the men he mentioned, and even she could see a few in the short seconds he did. “I’m feeling a bit self-conscious.”

“Ok, if it makes you feel better,” she conceded, peeling off both layers of wet shirt simultaneously and flinging the sopping pile to the sand. “I’m not nearly as skinny as half the girls over there, but – ”

“You’re perfect,” he interjected, disapproving the notion fiercely.

“See, you’ve proved my point. Don’t compare yourself, you’ve got nothing to worry about.” With a sigh and a roll of his eyes he realized she was right; and he’d just proved her point for him. He swiftly released the buttons of the shirt and wrestled his way out of the clingy sleeves before tossing it into the pile with her own. Rose whistled flirtatiously, purely to tease him.

“Rose! Now, don’t,” he admonished.

“Doctor, ’m only kiddin’.” She made every effort to hide how much his shirtless form gave her butterflies. Sure, he didn’t have the six-pack or rippling pectorals the muscle-y beach blokes had, and
his skin tone was fair, even more than her own. But this tall, lean frame with randomly scattered freckles and tufts of hair on his chest appealed to her more, if she was honest with herself. She shoved down a fresh wave of attraction for him before she could do something impulsive and kept her gaze away from his chest.

“Ok, then, guess it’s my turn again,” she remarked to herself. She unzipped and shimmied out of her shorts as well, making sure the bottoms weren’t sliding down her legs along with them. If the Doctor liked what he saw or was at all distracted, he didn’t let on. She knew he’d never seen her in a swimsuit, though it didn’t particularly matter, as he frequently burst into her room in the morning unannounced, often finding her without pajama bottoms and retreating to behind the door as apologies barreled out of his mouth consecutively. Once, her robe came untied as she passed him in the hall after a shower, and though he promised he hadn’t seen anything, she’d always known he was lying. The only thing about the suit he commented on was the color, as she predicted earlier.

“Look, we’re matching!” he beamed, pointing between their suits a few times. “Ah, the TARDIS really is brilliant, isn’t she? Ok, round two. Come on!” He pulled her back into the water once again.

And after only three tries, only one of which sent them underwater again, they caught the perfect wave. And the Doctor was right; it was much more fun than it sounded to ride a wave into shore on your belly, even better that she could hold the Doctor’s hand throughout the ride. What they hadn’t learned, though, was when to stand. They both crashed to a stop as the water became too shallow to carry them; the sand scraped her skin a bit too roughly in the process.

“Ouch,” the Doctor voiced her sentiments, propping up on his elbows as the water receded around them.

“Yeah, that wasn’t too smart. We should stand a little earlier next time.”

“But that was fun, wasn’t it?” he smiled, making no motion to stand.

“Yeah,” she agreed, turning on her side to face him as he did the same. It was strangely comfortable letting herself sink into the freshly wet sand, feeling the next wave tickle her skin with foam as it washed over them both passively, only a few inches deep. Peaceful.

“Y’know, I was thinkin’,” she asked.

“What were you thinking?” And she almost stopped herself from finishing that sentence, knowing where this would lead them.

“I’m a bit jealous of Michelle.” When confusion splayed across his face, she continued. “Jealous enough that I may have to go and get myself caught in a rip current until I need CPR.” More quickly than usual, he perceived the hidden implication in her words.

“Hmm,” he tilted his head to look at the sand as a smile played at one corner of his mouth. “Are you saying you actually want me to perform cardiopulmonary resuscitation on you, or are you asking for something else?” His eyes peeked up at her, knowing the answer.

When she only bit her lip in response, he prodded again.

“What exactly is it you want?” She just went for it.

“Can I kiss you?” she asked, rather than ask him to initiate. They were only two feet apart, having drifted into the sand with linked hands.

“What, here? Now?” he asked, indicating the mud and continuous flow of frothy water around them.
“Well, yeah,” she shrugged.

Without another word, he edged towards her through the shallow water between them. A rough, sandy hand on her exposed back pulled her to him and his lips were on hers, cold and wet and salty. Her arms wrapped around his neck, one hand combed through his dripping hair as she pulled herself against him, chest to chest. His lips parted just enough to warm hers and softly suck the last bit of salt from them. And he kissed her tenderly as ever, until she’d forgotten about sand and recurring waves and other beachgoers and furry lobsters. And, apparently, the lifeguard.

“Hey, guys, let’s keep this beach G-rated,” his voice called from maybe two feet behind them. They tore apart immediately, the Doctor shot up to sit and stare out at the water rather than turn and face further embarrassment from the bloke. Rose didn’t have the same issue; she sat and looked up at him with the best scowl she could manage. “See, been watching,” he said smugly, gesturing to his own eyes and then to her a few times.

“Oh, ok, fair’s fair,” she conceded, knowing PDA was frowned upon in public settings, and a little glad he was actually watching the beach as he should be. When he saw she didn’t intend to resume their amorous display, he wandered away with a typical swagger.

“Want to get out of the water? I’m gonna get all wrinkly.”

“Yeah, ok,” said the Doctor, moving to stand without looking at her. They walked towards the pile of wet clothes and his hands were in his pockets, his cheeks still pink.

“So, that was a bit awkward.”

“Yeah,” he agreed, picking up his shirt and rolling it into a ball. “Listen, Rose, let’s not… can we just… wait until we’ve got a bit more privacy to try that again.” It was a half-question, but more of a demand.

“Yeah, ‘course,” she nodded. “’M sorry. I… wasn’t thinkin’.”

“No, no, it’s alright, I just,” he fumbled with his ear, “don’t want an audience. Especially when we’re both half naked,” he looked down at his bare chest and feet.

“So, shall we lay in the sand for a bit?” he suggested, completely changing his tone and expression.

“But we haven’t got a towel or blanket or anything,” she laughed.

“Don’t need one! What? The sand’s soft, warm, dry…”

“Doctor, we’re soakin’ wet, we’re gonna get absolutely covered in sand.”

“Oh, alright,” he rolled his eyes, and dug a hand, then wrist, then nearly his entire forearm into his left pocket as she watched on in amazement. As his arm and hand emerged, a colorful piece of cloth did with it, and it continued to stream from out of the pocket for a few seconds as he pulled on it with alternating hands. In a moment the Doctor was holding a full-sized multicolor blanket in his hands, grinning at her from above it like he was expecting her to clap after his miniature magic show.

“Oh, alright,” he rolled his eyes, and dug a hand, then wrist, then nearly his entire forearm into his left pocket as she watched on in amazement. As his arm and hand emerged, a colorful piece of cloth did with it, and it continued to stream from out of the pocket for a few seconds as he pulled on it with alternating hands. In a moment the Doctor was holding a full-sized multicolor blanket in his hands, grinning at her from above it like he was expecting her to clap after his miniature magic show.

“Okay, I didn’t know they were that much bigger on the inside, and I thought it was only your suit!”

“Nah, sort of comes standard with all my trousers. I guess that includes swimwear!”

“But how’d it not get wet!?” her jaw still hung open in shock.
“They’ve got a waterproof, airtight seal when I’m not reaching into them. Like, the sonic, or the glasses,” he let one hand go of the blanket and dipped into the right pocket, pulling out said glasses and placing them on his face, no droplets or smears to be found. “Or in this case, a dry blanket. Come on,” he waved her after him as he walked away from the water, the blanket flapping in the breeze behind him.

They sat on the blanket for a while overlooking the waves, both of them propped up on their hands, their clothes laid out to dry below them. But as soon as Rose laid back and turned to him, he mimicked her movements.

“Y’know what we should do tonight?” she asked.

“What?”

“We should go into L.A. or something, find some really fancy place and just walk ‘round like celebrities.”

“But, Rose, we are celebrities. We’ve saved the planet more times than I can count.”

“Maybe you have, Doctor, not sure I can say that I played much part.”

“Don’t be stupid, I could never have done it without you.”

“Really?” she smiled shyly at him.

“Yeah,” he smiled back. “And, as far as your plan, I think I have a better idea.”

“What’s that?”

“The pier, down that way a few miles,” he said, lying back on the blanket with his hands behind his head, smug as ever. “Sunset. Just as fancy, but with a better view.”

“Alright, I’m game.” She rolled onto her stomach. He finally told her about surfing in Australia, which it sounded like he was rubbish at. They ran back down to shore when they were dry and beginning to sweat from the sun, splashing water on each other in a childish war until they were both soaked from head to toe again. They’d gone through the third cycle of heating up and cooling off again when Rose started to feel the mistake of skipping breakfast.

“D’you remember that ice cream shop we passed on the street?” she asked as they collapsed onto the blanket, kicking up sand that stuck to their wet skin in the breeze.

“Yeah, I think so.”

“Want to get some?”

“Sure, I’d love to, but… I didn’t actually bring any money.” Rose scoffed. Of course he didn’t.

“You’ve always been such a cheap date.”

“What? I wasn’t expecting ice cream to be on the to-do list.”

“You thought we wouldn’t need anything to eat or drink after hours in the – oh no.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Sun. Doctor, I forgot to put on that sunscreen.” The Doctor hissed in a breath sympathetically.
“Ooo, that’s gonna hurt,” he noted, eyes glancing across the expanse of bare, peach-tinted skin.

“Ugh,” she sighed, falling back onto the blanket with an arm over her eyes. She laid there for a long moment contemplating her life choices before sitting up to meet the Doctor’s eyes, which still looked on after her. “We really better go,” she said, standing up. “I don’t need any more sun now.”

“Oh, alright then,” he complied, hopping up and starting to gather up the blanket as she shook sand off her mostly dried clothes.

“Here you are,” she addressed the forgotten white bottle as she pulled it out of the pocket of her shorts. She slipped on the clothes, with some difficulty as her skin was still damp, as the Doctor buttoned up his own shirt. In his haste he mismatched the buttons; she laughed quietly to herself but didn’t think it worth telling him when they’d be back in the TARDIS shortly.

“Oh, I think our sandals are still over where we tossed ‘em earlier,” she pointed to where Michelle and her mum had been.

“Got it,” he called as he ran over to collect them, throwing the blanket over his shoulder. But all he did was spin around in circles near the spot she remembered leaving them for about ten seconds before walking back, empty-handed and scratching his head. “Um, Rose…”

“They’re gone, aren’t they?”

“’Fraid so.”

“Ugh,” she put her head in her hands.

“Oh, Rose, don’t worry, it won’t be so bad. The way’s mostly paved with cement. Only a little bit of rocks and asphalt to go over. Look, I’ll tell you what. I’ll carry you ’til we reach the sidewalk.”

“What?” she asked in disbelief.

“Rose, relax,” he cautioned when she was on the verge of cursing, as she was prone to do in anger. “It’s alright, let’s go.” He took her hand as they started back towards the dirt path.

But they’d only gone fifty feet through the uneven, pebbly trail before Rose was hardly walking, cringing and gasping after each step.

“Hurt already?” he asked, stopping as she did.

“’S just… hard, and there’s a lot of little sharp rocks I didn’t notice before,” she tried to explain, as the Doctor didn’t seem to be in any discomfort. And really, in sandals she hadn’t noticed the plethora of hard things jutting from the dirt.

“Here,” he handed her the blanket, rolled up into a log. One arm swiped behind her knees to knock her off balance as the other was on her back to stop her from falling, and within two seconds he’d tripped her, caught her, and cradled her against his chest as easily if she weighed three stone (when the reality was closer to ten). “Better?” he asked as he started to walk.

“Doctor, y’don’t have to – ”
“I insist.”
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Ok, I have a bit to say about this chapter. First, it contains what I have found to be a controversial element for some people in the DW fandom. Not overly controversial, but, apparently, not everyone agrees that they would have liked for it to happen. Certainly not anything to require a trigger warning, however, so you can be at ease there. If you aren't on board with this controversial element, feel free to skip ahead once you’ve discovered it (check the note at the end if you just have to know ahead of time).

Second, you may find yourself thinking a certain event seems unlikely. Well, I will be honest. There was just one scene that I needed to happen, and I had to pull a few strings in order for it to play out.

Feel free to comment or message regarding your thoughts on either of these subjects (though please be respectful).

Additional note: it was recently brought to my attention by the TARDIS wikia (which I was consulting for a later chapter that’s in the works) that the ‘the’ in ‘the Doctor’ is not capitalized. My apologies that it had been capitalized thus far; I have gone back and made changes to previous chapters accordingly. You may see a random ‘The Doctor’ now and then that evaded my radar as I edited, but the majority of them should be fixed now.

The caveats aside, this chapter is one of my absolute favorites. Do let me know what you think. Happy reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Everything was fine, really. They’d arrived back at the TARDIS without another incident, and Rose had insisted on walking once they’d reached concrete. Though, it became more of a run as the ground began to scald her feet. The shower had rid his skin of the crusty mixture of sand and salt, cleared the dirt and soot from the asphalt from his feet, brought his hair back to its pliable and fluffy texture. He’d palmed some product through it to his liking, applied a discreet amount of cologne – pleasant but not overpowering, as was his usual routine, and returned to his typical clothes, choosing a light blue Oxford and ditching the tie, for now. He’d gone out and sat down in the kitchen where she told him to meet her, after his promise they could make lunch as a consolation for missing out on the (as they found out) gelato.

And then Rose came through the doorway, bare feet plodding onto the floor of the kitchen. He looked up to find her damp and unclothed, clutching tightly at the towel that barely covered her, another towel wrapped up in her hair.

“Uhm,” he just gaped at her, his tongue forming neither a question nor a reprimand.

“’S really startin’ to hurt,” she said quietly, and he noticed how her arms, chest, even her face had taken on a deep pink hue. He’d watched her in a swimsuit for hours, but still it took him a moment to tear his gaze from her precariously concealed frame.

“Yes, right, c’mere, let’s get you something,” he stammered, leaping from the chair to brush quickly past her without allowing his eyes to wander and lead her down the hall to the medical ward.
“This should do it,” he announced, tossing and catching a bottle of 37th-century sunburn remedy from one of the cabinets that he couldn’t remember how he’d acquired.

“It’s not around in your time yet,” he continued. “Taking the pain away and reduces the redness. It doesn’t repair DNA damage, though, so don’t rely on it, y’know, skin cancer and premature aging and… all that. Well, I’ll leave you to it,” he handed her the bottle without making eye contact and wheeled for the door to give her some privacy (and himself some ice water).

“Hang on, will you just – ” he stopped. “Do my back, though? ’S burnt, too.” Of course it was. Slowly he swiveled around to find her pleading with her wide eyes and a tentative smile, holding it out for him to take.

“Uhm…” he stared stupidly at the container in her hand, wanting to help her but frightened and a bit sickened by how he knew it would entice him to rub lotion on her freshly washed, fragrant skin that he could smell from where he stood. How much he’d just want to lift her onto one of the exam tables, let the towel fall from her chest… He mentally slapped himself.

“’Course,” he replied, forcing a smile and taking the bottle as she turned around.

“Thanks,” she whispered. But she surprised him again by shimmying the towel down to her waist, exposing her whole back. He squeezed his eyes shut to clear the torrent of fantasies this sparked of what the view was like from the other side. With a deep breath and a gulp of the air, he squirted the content of the bottle into his hands – and it wasn’t a lotion, but a clear gel. Knowing the coolness would feel good in her case, he applied the drops directly to her skin rather than rub it into his palms.

It was her tiny shiver in response that sprung his self-containment from beneath the lid he’d been flattening down. His hands slid down her back to grip her waist as he stepped closer, pulling her snugly against him. He breathed her in – medicated gel and soap and shampoo and Rose – as his lips hovered at her neck just below where the towel kept her hair tucked away. He let out a cool breath across her skin, and despite her obvious efforts to bite it back, she moaned. Quiet and fleeting, but unmistakable.

His mouth brushed over her skin, coaxing that sound he craved from Rose’s mouth again, clearer, louder. His lips parted as they traveled across her neck, soft and delectable despite whatever he’d just rubbed into her skin. Without his permission, his hands inched around her waist as he kissed down to her shoulder, fingertips just grazing her stomach as they climbed higher, searching. His mouth returned to her neck to suck lightly where he knew she wasn’t red, and Rose cried out again. The craft of his tongue was interrupted as his hands met soft mounds of flesh and he muffled a groan against her skin. His fingers cupped her smooth, perfect curves while his thumbs circled across their center, and his head was spinning.

And then she said his name. Not in a throes of passion, dragged out sort of way. In a level-headed way. It was enough to snap him out of his mindless self-indulgence, his hands and lips abandoning their posts in an instant.

“Rose, I – ” he whispered hastily before growling softly at himself. “I’ll just – go. I’m sorry.”
He turned and walked briskly from her, socks sliding on the smooth floor in his attempt as his balance was still thrown from the sensory overload. Once he’d reached the hall he tugged roughly on his hair as his hands coursed through it, guilt and lust fighting for dominance in his mind. He soon found himself back in the kitchen, and he collapsed into a chair, hunching over to rub his palms over his eyes. More than anything, he was angry. Angry at the universe for making this so complicated. If he were human, they could make love so simply, so effortlessly. They’d have done it ages ago. Maybe if he wasn’t a certifiable wreck he would never have hid anything from her in the first place. Regardless, he wished he didn’t feel the need to.

He only wanted her to be happy, untainted by the superfluous baggage of 900-plus years of life. And as it turned out, being with him in that way would make her happy. It was easy to understand; he also wanted a more intimate form of interaction, one that would reflect the fact that they both regarded each other as more than just mates. But his plan was never going to work if he couldn’t bloody control himself. Besides that, he was never any good at subtlety; and he still hadn’t exactly told her why or how he wanted to ‘take things slow.’ All he seemed to be doing was teasing and running away from her, from her perspective. Smooth.

He stood to get to work making the salad he’d decided on for lunch so she wouldn’t arrive to find him idle and brooding. He tossed together some romaine, spinach, cabbage… Maybe he should move up tonight’s activities to earlier, skip ahead a bit. It’s not like they didn’t get their days and nights jumbled often already. Sun-dried tomatoes, corn, bell peppers… He thought she would enjoy what he had in mind. Well, was 94.6 percent sure. As long as he didn’t pull another move like that, or some catastrophe didn’t unfold, as they’re known to do around him. Cheddar, pumpkin seeds, cilantro…

He decided to fry up some chicken cutlets with chili peppers, spices, and a squeeze of lime to add some protein to the dish. They cooked up quickly and he tossed the still-steaming pieces over the greens. Just as he finished it off with some ranch and avocado slices, a chair rustled behind him.

“Rose, I really am sorry,” he said, turning to her. She’d put on modest clothes and her skin was nearly back to normal, hair still wet and taking on its natural waviness.

“No, Doctor, ‘m sorry, too. I shouldn’t’ve asked.”

“No,” he insisted. “It was me. I was over the mark.”

“’S alright. You’re forgiven,” she said with a smile. Which only made him hate himself more. Didn’t she want a normal lover? One who didn’t go into a panic when their physical contact reached a new level? He provided a weak smile and a hushed ‘thanks’ in response and dropped the subject.

“So, uhm, d’you fancy leaving a bit early to head back to the pier? Perhaps after we’ve finished eating?” he asked as he dished out the salad and brought them to the table. She sighed.

“Thought it was only half-past three.”

“We could… skip ahead a bit. I know I promised you a sunset.”

“You’re so impatient,” she accused him, focusing on the contents of her plate.

“Not always,” he defended himself. “Besides, we can make up for it later.”

She was quiet through a chunk of the colorful salad before nodding hesitantly.

“Okay, sure.”
“Brilliant,” he choked out with a mouthful. She shook her head in disapproval of his table manners.

They finished eating in relative silence; both recovering from their latest encounter, he was convinced.

“So, how about we get that ice cream we missed on the pier? I can rustle up some American currency somewhere before we leave,” he announced as he grabbed their dishes and headed to the sink.

“Sounds great. Listen, ‘m just gonna go… get ready.” He heard bare feet shuffle across the room behind him, and by the time he turned around she was gone. He’d upset her more than she let on. He had to make it up to her tonight.

He picked up his favorite brown tie and laced on his cream-colored Chucks before dragging his feet back to the console, torn between checking on her and giving her space from his what had to be infuriating mixed signals. The latter quickly won out. Slumping into the jumpseat, he pulled a pen and paper from the console, starting to scribble absentely in Gallifreyan potential ways he could do that ‘making it up to her’ bit. He’d covered one possibility in the first four minutes, but when Rose came up behind him thirty-seven minutes later, he was still chewing on the pen cap, staring at nothing.

“Writin’ something?” she asked from over his shoulder, and he jumped, caught off guard in his mental haze.

“Nothing,” he exclaimed, leaping up and stashing the paper in his pocket, sending the pen flying somewhere unseen across the room before turning to her.

Her hair flowed in shining, proper curls now, dark lashes and deep green eyeshadow rimmed her eyes, lips were tinted with a light shade of pink. But what made his breath catch and his lips fall open was the dress. The knee-length, form-fitting, all-black dress, stunning but modest, without revealing excessive skin. Heels, to match.

“Rose, what’re you – ” he tripped over his words.

“What d’you think?” she asked with an attempt at a modeling pose.


“Well, this is technically a date, isn’t it?” she asked, looking for affirmention of her wardrobe choices. He never did like the word ‘date’, and was hesitant to label the evening, fearing it would go awry. Make it up to her, MAKE IT UP TO HER! His subconscious berated him, and his answer became absurdly simple.

“I suppose, technically, it is. Want me to change, too?”

“Well… I think your tux might match better?” she left it open ended, leaving him to make the decision. Another chance to screw things up. His hands found his pockets as he contemplated, eyes raking over Rose’s frame then his own. She was probably right. And he was in no position to disappoint her again.

“Ok. Hold on.” He dashed from the console and to his room, throwing successive pieces of his current suit onto his bed. The TARDIS has already rustled up the tuxedo he wore on the night of their lengthy encounter with Cybermen. He wasn’t all that thrilled to be putting it on again, associating it now with a handful of nightmares. But he supposed, it wasn’t about him. He threw on
all the necessary pieces and swapped for black Chucks. He left the bowtie undone, loosely hanging around his collar, and a couple buttons open for Rose’s sake. His dash back to the console was halted as he glanced in the mirror and saw his hair was in disarray from when he’d disturbed it earlier. He fixed it up into the organized mess he liked with a bit of water and a dollop more product before jogging back to the console.

“Bowtie, or no tie?” he asked, standing next to Rose and indicating his collar.

“I think you know the answer to that,” she smirked.

“Course,” he raised his eyebrows at her and slid the tie from under his collar, stuffing it into his pocket.

“Right, then, shall we?” his question was more of a statement, as he took command of the console before waiting for Rose’s reply.

In a few short seconds they stepped out to a cool breeze and a postcard-worthy sky painted with strokes of orange and pink, but those were sharply contrasted with the dingy alley he’d landed them in. Graffiti marked the walls where bricks weren’t missing from the structure, garbage cans both an eyesore and producing an unpleasant smell. He could sense Rose’s discomfort and impatience to escape the dark corridor.

“I didn’t want another incident like last time, so I chose a less crowded venue,” he explained to her. “Hope you don’t mind.”

“No, ’s fine,” she assured him. Besides, they really were only about fifty yards from the main road.

The Doctor held his elbow out for her expectantly, and she linked her arm through his as they walked out to meet the evening’s adventure.

Rose’s attractiveness was enough to invite attention from nearly everyone they met; but tonight, with her impeccable dress and the extra care to her makeup and hair, her outrageous beauty was turning all sorts of heads. More than usual. Enough to flare up jealousy he didn’t have a right to act upon, not with his track record in their unconventional relationship, but that he acted on nonetheless.

More than once, they passed a bloke who stared at her one second too long, prompting the Doctor to pull her against him greedily with a full-blown ‘oncoming storm’ glare to the offender. After a whistle from an anonymous member of a randy and probably tipsy group of teenagers, he unlinked their arms to put his over her shoulder, striving for some measure of protection against their undesirable advances. As the cashier at the ice cream shop toed the line separating friendly customer relations and deliberate flirting, he interrupted their discussion of who-knows-what with an excuse that they had a tight schedule that evening. And as he tugged Rose along with him to the exit, he asked her what the hell that was about.

But soon he found perhaps it worked both ways. In the brief couple minutes Rose stopped at the loo shortly after finishing their frozen treats (as a purist, he’d stuck with vanilla, while hers was a mixture of caramel and chocolate) he was approached by a woman about Rose’s age as he stood against the wooden railing of the pier, admiring the darkening water.

“So, what’s the occasion?” she asked.

“Oh, nothing, really,” he replied, thrown by the random question and not thinking of Rose or how she might have been injured by the flippant reply. He merely meant to communicate the black-and-white getup wasn’t for a wedding or funeral or something. But she took it quite differently,
employing several unwelcome flirtations on him while he stood fairly bewildered and silent, tugging at his hair and managing a few ‘um’s in between her questions. But before he could choke on his own tongue or hurl himself off the pier, Rose appeared at his side, arm in his and her body pressing against him. The message was received with clarity. And as the stranger walked away in defeat, *she* asked *him* what the hell that was about.

Somehow, Rose convinced him to take a spin on the Ferris wheel that loomed precariously over the pier, and the water below. Despite the cramped seats (especially for his long legs) and the visible dirt and rust, she seemed to enjoy herself at the start, admiring the view and laughing at the mild swings each stop created. But by the end she was bored, and in retrospect he thinks it *may* have been due to the fact he narrated the poor structural integrity, mediocre physics in the circular design, and the antiquity of the gondolas and restraint system through the entire ride.

“Well aren’t you just a bundle o’joy at theme parks,” she said with a roll of her eyes as they disentangled themselves from the seatbelt and climbed out of their swaying bucket.

“What?” he’d retorted. He was simply being observant, calculating, as always. It didn’t seem to bother her before. She only shook her head in response with a smile; somehow his lack of understanding amused her.

He didn’t bother to *convince* Rose to accompany him to the arcade; he practically ran inside, causing her to break from his arm but forcing her to follow. And he’d explained his fascination with the interactive films humans called video games, though he’d never actually played any. On hearing his lack of experience, Rose admittedly kicked his arse at a game called *Donkey Kong*.

The arse-kicking had sparked a second sweet tooth, and as a sugary cart lured them into a second impetuous purchase, the Doctor realized he hadn’t once thought of their recent drama. It was just him and Rose, enjoying each other’s company, the occasional petty banter but no complications heating the air between them. It was simple. Natural. But then, they also weren’t alone in a dark room together when his imagination could unleash itself on them both.

They were in the middle of licking cotton candy from their fingers when they found themselves in a secluded area of the pier, mostly free from attractions and tourists. A couple danced in the twilight near the edge of the pier, entirely undisturbed by the bustling strip only a dozen meters away, tucked away in the relative darkness of this dimly lit section they’d stumbled upon. He knew how to dance, and he’d made that point clearly to Rose. But it had been ages, it seemed, since he’d dipped her in the TARDIS to ward off the ‘Captain of the Innuendo Squad,’ as Mickey had aptly named him. One of the few things Mickey Smith got right. He was mesmerized by the dancers for a long moment, the sickly sweet pink fluff in his hands forgotten as he admired their skill and tried to predict their next movements. But the dance was unfamiliar to him, and he could only look on in awe, something in the back of his mind wishing he’d have thought of something as romantic to do with Rose. They were certainly dressed the part.

Rose neither pulled him back nor tried to speak, so he guessed she was enjoying the performance as well. It was a sensual dance, no distance between their bodies and plenty of hip movements, twirls, and lifts; he almost felt as though he intruded on what they intended to be a private intimacy. But, if they’d wanted that they certainly wouldn’t have come to a public place. The man suddenly took notice of the two uninvited onlookers; their choreography came to a halt a few seconds later and the pair started to walk towards them.

“Sorry, we didn’t mean to – interrupt,” the Doctor began apologetically. “You’re both brilliant, guess we just couldn’t resist,” he added with his most charming smile.

“Thank you,” the gentleman said with a nod of his head. He spoke with a thick Spanish accent he
guessed was South American in origin.

“Yeah, you two are great,” Rose added, addressing the woman at his side more than the man.

“Thank you,” she responded in kind, the same heavy Spanish inflection.

“Did you want us to…?” the Doctor gestured to the pier behind them, indicating if they’d like to reclaim to the relative privacy they shared before.

“No, it’s ok, señor, we were only practicing,” the man assured him.

“Practicing?” asked the Doctor.

“Yes. We’re in L.A. for a competition. We stopped by here and couldn’t resist a short dance.” The man shared an excited look with his dancing partner.

“What sort of dance is it?” asked the Doctor, his curiosity winning out over his instinct not to annoy the strangers.

“El Tango, of course,” he replied with enthusiasm and a purposefully strong accent. “We’re from Argentina.”

“Right, of course,” the Doctor mimicked, pretending he was familiar with anything but the name.

“I’m the Doctor, by the way,” he reached out a hand to him.

“Antonio,” he accepted the handshake. “But everyone calls me Tonio.”

“Ana,” the woman said as the Doctor’s hand extended to hers.

Rose introduced herself as well, with a smile from Ana but a seductive kiss of her hand from Tonio that made her blush. What? He could do that. Why didn’t she blush around him? He supposed this exotic bloke was good-looking, he gave him that. He was dressed as nicely as he was, a white shirt open at the collar and expensive-looking gray slacks. Chiseled from the frequent bouts of dancing, he guessed, an appealing hue of light brown skin, soft raven-colored hair.

“Want to join us?” Tonio asked suddenly, breaking him from his physical evaluation of the man.

“Oh, no, we couldn’t,” the Doctor declined quickly with a gesture of his hand. “We don’t know it.”

“We can teach you!” he insisted. “It would be good practice for us to explain.”

“Ahh…” the Doctor stalled, floundering for an excuse to give them a pass. He turned to Rose in a last-ditch effort to find an idea, but she only shrugged and raised her eyebrows, clearly not opposed to the idea.

“Uhm, see, we… uhm, we have – ”

“You can’t think of any excuse, señor. Come on!” He took the Doctor’s hand to tow him further from the spectacle behind them, towards the edge. Ana and Rose followed without objection, sharing a few comments he couldn’t hear to one another before catching up with them. Once they’d reached a spot fit for Tonio’s fancy, he and Ana were against each other in a flash, their arms linked and hips aligned like second nature. The Doctor stood facing the lovely blonde opposite him but made no motions to hold her, nervously gulping down the protests that wanted to cough their way out of his throat.

“What, are you two brother and sister or something?” Ana asked.
“No,” replied the Doctor with a slight scowl, offended at the thought. They looked nothing alike.

“Well, come on then, like this,” Tonio urged him, holding up their connected hands to demonstrate. The Doctor’s eyes flitted from him to Ana to Rose a couple times before yielding. Rose’s wide-eyed, silent appeal did him in; though, he wasn’t sure why she was so willing to participate in unofficial dancing lessons from strangers. He took the step to close the distance between them, careful not to step on her exposed toes, fingers of his left hand lacing with her right. His other arm came to rest on Rose’s back, imitating Tonio’s hold on Ana, but he maintained the safety of a few inches between their bodies. Tonio scoffed and his hands dropped from his partner. The Doctor followed his lead, hoping by some miracle he’d decided to cancel the lesson.

“No, not you,” he said as he approached them, leading the Doctor’s hands back to where they belonged.

“Doctor,” Tonio continued, his name rolling off his tongue in a way he’d never heard it said before. “Are you afraid of her? Of Rose?” he gestured to Rose.

“What sort of question is that?” he retorted, forehead creasing.

“She’s beautiful isn’t she?” The Doctor didn’t respond, but frowned at Tonio for what he wrongly assumed to be a flirtation. “If you don’t want me, or anyone else to dance with her, prove it. Show me.” He rejoined his partner in a close embrace, eyes still locked on the Doctor’s. It was a challenge, a psychological trick to entice him to follow his instructions. But, jealous as he tended to become where Rose was concerned, his arm tightened around her anyway, pulling her against his waist gently. Rose bit her lip to hide a delighted smile as she followed Ana’s lead and the arm not linked with his wrapped around his back.

“Perfect,” Tonio praised. “Ok, now, Ana steps back with her left, while I step forward with my right.” They acted out the movement slowly, but fluidly. Tenuously, both pairs of eyes on their feet, they mimicked the step, though it was clunky and hardly in unison as the opposing couple’s.

“Good. But, try bending your knees a little more, it makes it easier to move together.” Both couples took another step, the Doctor and Rose heeding the advice.

“See how we don’t move straight back?” Ana addressed Rose. “The foot should angle out slightly, almost like ice skating.”

“Same for you, Doctor,” Tonio added. They took another step, the slightly diagonal motion bringing them in sync, hips grazing hers as the Doctor chased after Rose’s retreating leg.

“Better,” said Tonio. “Now on this step, we move to the side a little quicker, and drag we slide the foot across slowly.” Rose managed to emulate Ana perfectly, but the Doctor failed to point his toes to the ground with the same grace as Tonio (he blamed it on the Chucks).

They reversed the motion, and the Doctor realized the difficulty in walking backwards and avoiding tripping up Rose without the ability to watch his footwork. It took a few rounds of the push-and-pull of their alternating leads for him to grow accustomed to the reversed steps.

The turns that gave him the most trouble. Three short, quick rotations of their bodies and shuffles of their feet that in the end would turn them around 180 degrees. Twice by tripping, once by stepping on Rose’s foot, and once by starting on his wrong foot, he made a fool of them both in front of the professionals. He grunted and huffed through Tonio’s commentary and was already frustrated enough to give up and storm across the pier without another word to the flaunting Argentines.
“Doctor, ‘s alright, just concentrate,” Rose whispered, her lips only a few inches beneath his as they remained pressed against each other despite his ineptitude. His aggravation melted at the soft encouragement he heard in her voice. “Don’t look at your feet, just feel ‘em. And mine, too, if you don’t mind,” she smiled up at him as he tore his gaze from their feet and caught her eyes. All her words were too quiet for the others to hear, and for that he was grateful. Comfortable in her gaze, he attempted to lead them through the turns a fifth time, focusing on the movement of her hips, brushing the inside of her thigh with his as he followed her maneuvers, alternating their feet, and before he realized it they’d finished the turn.

“Good!” called Ana with a few claps. “Now. Rose, this is one of the most important parts of the tango. The ocho.” Tonio’s feet stayed grounded, but his waist and shoulders rotated to allow Ana to dance in front of him, side to side twice, while their arms remained linked.

Rose didn’t get it right the first few times, healing his wounded ego a bit that he couldn’t master the turns on the first try. Her feet were too messy on her third attempt and he couldn’t help but chuckle softly.

“Oi!” Rose half-shouted at him half a foot away from his face. “I’m tryin’!”

“I know,” he said apologetically. “You’re doing great. Sorry, I didn’t mean to laugh.” Tonio approached them as Rose began again, and before the Doctor’s hands could readjust to offer her some defense, he was guiding her movements, his hands on her waist.

“Watch the hands,” the Doctor admonished him, glaring between his hands and his face, threatening him if he dared anything more.

“Doctor, trust me, Ana is the only woman for me.” The Doctor nodded almost imperceptibly, allowing them to continue, but watching diligently for his hands to even consider misbehaving. In a few short minutes, Rose had grasped the technique with Tonio’s assistance. As he backed away she started anew, and in four counts she nailed it, turning on the balls of her feet and swiveling her hips perfectly, all while maintaining eye contact with him. In front of him, to his far right, and repeat. It was the single most seductive thing he’d ever seen her do, and he swallowed hard as he watched her dance around him, gripping as tightly to her hand and shoulder as her movements would allow. His jealousy of Tonio was forgotten as he became her only focus, visual and physical.

Tonio had one more move for them both, a full 360-degree turn. Unlike the shorter turn, there was more distance between them, no intertwining of legs. They accomplished it in three short attempts and shared an ecstatic grin of achievement before it was time to choreograph what they’d learned together.

The first complete round was slow, calculated; the anticipation of each next move had them both pressing into each other each time their clothes skimmed to tease them. The excitement of having never experienced the dance before (not this type of dance), the strangers watching them, the dark sky, the smell of the ocean… everything resurrected an intense longing for her. He kept his hands in place and his movements in line, but he practically grinded against her on their first 180 turn. Determined to quickly recover from his audacity, he adjusted slightly, putting an inch of space between their hips, but Rose pulled herself secure against him again, encouraged rather than bothered by the bold move.

On their second complete run, they still followed the lead of the Argentine couple, their tempo increasing. It was then the Doctor realized their movements took them in a rough square from start to finish, and imagined the elegance that would provide the pair in a staged performance. They tried a second time at the same pace, because he scraped her foot with his shoe on their first turn, and Rose stumbled on her second ocho. Only occasionally glancing to the others, loosely copying their steps.
Soon they were dancing at the tempo they’d found the couple when they arrived, no longer requiring
the crutch of observation and mimicry of the movements as they went. Rose’s chest rested against his
as they stepped – forward, forward, side and slide… back, back, side and slide. The Doctor’s
forehead was on hers as they swayed through the 180 turn, lips nearly touching for a fleeting
moment, teasing, before she was backing away from him. Forward, forward, side and slide. Her
breath came hot upon his neck as she leaned into him on their second turn, until his retreat separated
them again, sweet retaliation. Back, side, forward, side and slide. The Doctor saw the same mixture
of intense focus and proliferating desire in Rose that he felt himself as their eyes met on the full turn.
His feet halted as Rose’s picked up speed, twirling around his body with his arms for hinges, hips
tantalizing him, daring him to move. He kept dutifully still, but he couldn’t tear his eyes from her
form; they captured every single movement as he waited patiently to advance on her a final time,
forward, forward, side and slide.

And Rose burst into giggles, because they’d done it, they’d finished the dance without error. Her
hand broke from his so both arms could wrap around him excitedly. It was somewhat disorienting to
break from the predatory characters they’d become, prancing over the wooden planks halfway
between each other’s legs, and return to reality. The world where he’d once again have to forfeit the
intimate touches that had become permissible in the context of the dance, now that he craved them all
the more after the thrilling chase it had thrust them into. But he was proud of himself, and proud and
impressed and *seduced* by her, so he returned the hug enthusiastically before pulling back.

“We did it,” Rose laughed, beaming.

“You were brilliant,” he said, tapping her nose with his index finger.

“So were you, *señor,*” she teased with an attempt at Spanish that wasn’t half bad. He chuckled as he
lifted her chin with one hand to press a soft kiss to her lips.

“*Señorita,*” he teased her back.

“Well, aren’t you two adorable.” It was Tonio. He’d forgotten his and Ana’s existence during their
last performance, moving for no one but Rose, as she moved only for him. He dropped his hand
from her face and they pulled apart, necessity no longer an excuse for their intimate proximity.

“You learn fast,” Tonio continued. “I’m impressed.” Certainly, they’d lacked the finesse, technique,
and experience of the other two, but the compliment stroked his ego regardless.

“Thanks. Although, I know you only taught us the simple moves.” Truthfully, the couple was
dancing a much more complicated dance with more exaggerated movements when they’d arrived.

“Maybe,” Ana replied. “But don’t compare yourselves. You looked beautiful together.”

Rose breathed out a shy laugh similar to his own as his gaze dropped to the wood beneath them, too
nervous to meet Rose’s eyes after the suggestive comment. Another uninvolved, objective outsider
peering in on their complicated friendship and seeing something more. It wasn’t the first time, and he
had a feeling it wouldn’t be the last.

“Listen, we had better be going. We have to wake early tomorrow,” Tonio said, reaching for the
Doctor’s hand once more to bookend their meeting.

“Best of luck,” he replied. “And thanks for the lesson,” he added, taking Tonio’s hand in both of his
to express his gratitude. Reluctant, hard-wrung gratitude, but it was there nonetheless.

“Of course,” he turned his attention to Rose, planting another kiss to her hand. The Doctor decided
to respond in kind.

“Ana, it was a pleasure,” he said, bowing his head to kiss her hand as well.

“It was great meeting you, too,” she smiled.

And so, with a polite wave, he and Rose were alone again. It was… fifty six minutes later. He guessed around 9pm local time. The crowds had started to dissipate from the boardwalk (as it was a weeknight, after all), but the lights were no less striking against the now dark sky. Rose’s hand in his, he walked to the edge of the pier to lean over the railing, gazing out at the moon glowing white in the cloudless sky, illuminating the black water below. They couldn’t see the stars, though; the technicolored tourist attraction around them ensured that.

“That was fun,” Rose sighed as she slumped against his shoulder, staring down at the white foam striking against the supports of the pier. “Thanks.”

“Don’t thank me, it certainly wasn’t my idea.”

“Did you not like it?” There was rejection in her tone.

“No, I did, it was lovely,” he unlinked their hands to wrap his arm around her shoulder, pulling her closer. “Just, wasn’t something I had planned.”

They maintained their embrace through a few seconds of peaceful silence while the Doctor’s mind swirled with the events of the day and particularly the moments of the last hour. As his imagination wandered he became powerless to abstain longer; his arm turned her towards him as he angled his head down to capture her lips, wet and careless. Her fingers splayed out in his hair and his hands were on her back, fastening her to him as she deepened the kiss further, lips parting to invite his tongue. The heat and tension from the dance that their guests had stamped out was rekindled, blazing between them again with a vengeance, determined to unhinge one or both of them from the careful tiptoeing they made a habit of.

He hadn’t meant for it to happen. But when Rose latched onto the tip of his tongue and tugged it into her mouth, sucking lightly, the little sigh of contentment he breathed through his nose turned into something more like a noisy, impatient moan. He might have expected her to happily accept the outburst, but when she responded with her own he was undone. One hand still securely on her back, he lifted the other to her cheek, thumb circling soft caresses over her skin as he held her still. Because as much as he knew she should be stopping them, he didn’t want her to. Didn’t want to leave her soft, full lips for a second; to forget the taste of her on his tongue; to be bereft of the smooth hands that were now on his neck.

Slowly his hand slid back, palm sliding across her ear as he buried his fingers in her hair; at the same time Rose swiveled them both around, pinning him against the wooden railing behind them. Her hands unclasped from his neck and slid down his chest and along his stomach until they were on his waist and she was pulling her hips against his; with the transient friction he was on the brink of showing her just how turned on he already was. With each passing second they were less discrete, less human and Time Lord; they became as one as their lips and tongues danced together, continuing where their bodies left off.

He knew he had to focus, to break them apart, despite how every nerve ending in his body cried out insatiably for even more of her skin and her touches and soft sighs, because a connection of the flesh demanded first a connection of the mind. With every ounce of inner strength his lips broke from hers, the hand in her hair falling to her shoulder as his forehead rested against hers. Gasping heavily for air, more out of desperation for her than for oxygen, he opened his eyes to find her looking at him
with the same severe longing sweltering in himself. He squeezed his eyes shut with a grimace and fought to get a foothold in reality, staying her with the hand on her shoulder as she tried to reunite their lips.

“D’you… want to… head back to the TARDIS?” he asked between panting breaths. He thought if they could get away from the location of the excitement, the memories of the sensual dance, they could both think straight, relax. He brightened at the thought of fidgeting with some gadgets he’d left in his room with the screwdriver, or pilfering through old library collections to recover his sanity. She hesitated, eyeing his lips and tightening her hold on his waist for a moment.

“Yeah,” she breathed with a nod. They both released their grip on one another, pivoting for one last cool, reviving breath of the salty wind from across the ocean before turning to make their way back across the pier.

The walk was mostly silent, and unusual in that they neither held hands nor playfully nudged each other with friendly chatter. He supposed he did want some distance for a few moments, but he wouldn’t have declined her if she sought to return to the more platonic (or at least, less romantic) gestures they were both accustomed to. He assumed she must have also been riding the high of that exhilarating kiss… or at least, what he found quite exhilarating. So he didn’t worry much about her relative silence or the fact that she kept the few inches between their arms undisturbed, as she ordinarily wouldn’t.

They parted ways to change once they were on the other side of the blue doors. In the safety of his room the Doctor shrugged out of his coat and kicked off his trainers, and immediately on reaching the sink of his bathroom he splashed a bit of cold water on his face to cool himself off. With a few deep breaths in the mirror, he could feel his blood pressure returning to normal, willing the invasive fantasies to subside, before he toweled off the droplets of water currently dripping down his neck and onto his shirt. He nicked the broken Rolex from the nightstand that’d been begging to be fixed for weeks now and dipped into his pocket for the sonic, only to remember he hadn’t transferred it from his brown suit.

“Glad I didn’t need this tonight,” he muttered to himself as he rummaged in the jacket pocket until he found it, along with his glasses. “Or these,” he added to no one but the TARDIS as he slipped them on. Both items in hand, he belly-flopped theatrically onto his bed and started to take apart the watch. Subconsciously, he’d faced the open door, expecting Rose to come looking for him after she’d changed, either with an idea of some activity to do until she was tired, or to say goodnight. He was immediately calmed by the intricate machinery of the inside of the watch. A rare reaction to anyone but an engineer, he was sure. He conceded in a way he was an engineer, an intergalactic, time-traveling engineer that had saved the world with nothing but a screwdriver. The battery retained about half its charged capacity, the hands their functionality… the quartz oscillator was intact. It was a single cog linking the resonating mechanism to the hands that seemed to be stuck. His eyes strained to observe the adjustments he made as he repeatedly changed the settings on the sonic, so much so that he hadn’t noticed Rose standing in his doorway. It was the gentle pad of her feet on the carpet as she crossed a beeline to his bed that made him look up.

“Hey,” he smiled lightly, but didn’t budge. The dress had been exchanged for magenta-colored shorts and an 80’s-remniscent baggy T-shirt, the heels discarded, but her hair and face hadn’t been touched.

“So, um… did you want to, stay in here tonight?” He was confused by her question, unsure exactly what she was asking.

“Not sure. I’m just working on fixing this watch,” he held it up. “Might wander about after it’s
“finished though.”

“No, I mean, for bed. D’you prefer your room?”

“Dunno if I’ll be able to sleep tonight,” he shrugged. “I’ve had a lot more rest than usual the past couple days.”

“Yeah, but, isn’t there anything you wanted to do?” she asked with a chuckle. He guessed she wouldn’t want to go to sleep yet. She’d been awake maybe eight hours today so far.

“Like what?” he asked, giving her the reins to decide.

“Like pickin’ up where we left off,” she laughed as if she thought he was joking when he asked.

“Oh,” he dropped his eyes from her. “I – I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

“What?” She looked so confused, he immediately knew he’d miscommunicated somewhere, somehow. Unable to think of the right question, he went for an obvious statement.

“We both know how hard it is to stop once we’ve started.”

“So… don’t stop?” Like it was so simple.

“Rose, I’ve told you why I can’t do that.”

“No, you haven’t. Not really.” He peeled off his glasses and chewed on one of the ends, deliberating. She was right, but he still hadn’t thought of a tactful way to explain it. He’d decided showing her would be more appropriate.

“The bottom line is, I’m not ready for it,” he confessed after a moment, too abruptly.

“So when you said ‘want to go back to the TARDIS,’ you didn’t mean…” Of course.

God he was thick. Why hadn’t he considered the obvious interpretation of that question? It made perfect sense for her to expect, well, what she expected.

“I’m sorry,” he sighed in frustration at himself, rubbing his temples. “I can see how that sounded now. But, no, I didn’t. I just needed to cool off.” She smiled, but it was one of those smiles devoid of happiness, full of anger and disappointment. He could wedge the screwdriver into his own brain if it meant it would put a stop to his stupidity. It was unfair. Wildly unfair, he could comprehend that much. To tease and to not communicate and to turn her down, when, technically, she’d just asked him to sleep with her. In the non-literal sense. He thought. He was fairly sure that’s what she meant.

All he wanted to do was tug her down onto the bed with him and do exactly that. Every last thought that distracted him from the watch was of Rose: her bottom lip between both of his, the feel of her hands in his hair, the touch of her bared skin this morning. But still he couldn’t move.

“Right, ok.” And she turned on a heel to walk quickly from his room.

“Rose, please, wait,” he called after her. They could find something else to do, couldn’t they? But she didn’t wait. He heard her bedroom door close from down the hall only a few seconds after she disappeared from the door frame. She must be furious with him now, yet again, and he didn’t want to worsen it. Instead of following her, he just suffocated himself in the blankets on his bed, willing himself to fade into unconsciousness and, of course, failing, before returning hopelessly to the watch.

Once it was ticking away again, he wandered over to her door and stood outside it, fist hovering in the air as he contemplated knocking, but chickened out. And for all he knew, that could have been
an even bigger mistake than the first. He could only hope that she would forgive him by morning as he skulked over to the library. He just needed *time*. Time he didn’t have, judging by the way they suddenly couldn’t keep their hands to themselves. He cringed at the bitter irony that he seemed to have no control over what he was supposed to be ‘lord’ of as he prepared for a sleepless night.

Chapter End Notes

Another additional note: (spoiler!!!) I learned the rough choreography for the Doctor and Rose's dance from an introductory tango crash course I took as an undergrad (very reluctantly and only at the insistence of a friend of mine). If you'd like a brief glimpse of how the basic steps of the dance look, check out the first minute or so of this video: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ppW1KpJqA1c
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

I'm going to put all my cards on the table here - I'm feeling anxious about this chapter. There's a lot of unexplored territory and I'm hoping I've executed the sentiments and concepts well. Please feel free to comment on how you perceive or interpret the two major developments that occur - I love getting your messages!

Warning: Bit of Earth history modified and slightly fabricated for my own purposes (don't worry, nothing too major).

(spoiler alert)

Warning #2: Moderate argument unfolds.

She wasn’t angry with him as the door to her room closed behind her. And yet, she was angry with him as she breathed a loud, aggravated sigh into her pillow. Besides the anger, there was embarrassment, and a little rejection, even though she knew it was uncalled for. But the anger simmered deep inside, starting to bubble its way to the surface though guilt kept a lid on it for the time being. It didn’t stem from the Doctor not being ready, of course not. It was that he wouldn’t tell her what was weighing so heavily on his hearts.

Because she knew his reluctance wasn’t on account of lack of desire; his was just as painfully obvious as her own. Nor a lack of experience, since he’d lived nearly a thousand years, she was sure he must have had experience with that sort of thing. It wasn’t that he didn’t feel comfortable with her, or else he wouldn’t emerge from his bathroom in only a towel and shaving cream asking if he should grow stubble for the fifth time in one month. Or randomly ask her to inspect the mole between his shoulder blades he couldn’t see without using multiple mirrors to make sure it hadn’t changed since she’d last seen it. No, whatever was holding him back was a mental obstacle: something was haunting him. Yet, he’d always kept his biggest secrets out of her reach, locked away inside a vaulted safe in some dark corner of his mind, and each time it was worse.

Because every time he’d gloss over a question or tactlessly change the subject or recklessly send them flying to a new destination, she knew it was something about his home, or something about how it was lost. That was what his previous self has dedicated his moments of solitude to brooding over, what he’d grieved painfully in moments he thought she couldn’t see. Her current Doctor didn’t noticeably ponder the past or walk with shadows of regret trailing alongside his flowing coat. Now that they were on the precipice of a physical relationship, he’d decided to start bringing all that back to the surface, and she wasn’t sure why he’d do that to himself. Maybe the mental connection he’d mentioned, and that she’d had a taste of once and so fleetingly, went deeper than she thought. Maybe nothing about him would be shielded from her view once they crossed the final line. Those puzzle pieces clicked into place quite well, and she had herself almost fully convinced that was his reasoning before realizing it didn’t matter whether she was right. It wouldn’t mean anything unless the Doctor confessed it himself.

Whatever his reasons were for not opening up, she was sure, in his mind, they were valid. But the lack of communication was killing her, and the relentless flirting and tantalizing that followed from his deficient physical restraint (ok, their) only made things worse. She couldn’t shake the invasive thought that it was lack of trust in her that kept him silent on the big issues through the years. She figured that couldn’t be true, but even so, communication and, by extension, honesty were two of the
most important components of any relationship, regardless of shagging or lack thereof.

After five minutes she settled on going to find him, but dithered for thirty on whether it would be to have a good rant at him about his clamming up or to apologize for taking off. In the end she decided to go with neither, and instead rolled sluggishly off her bed to request a trip to see her mum. If they could talk in privacy maybe she could offer some advice. Non-specific, of course. She wouldn’t give too many details about things that may or may not be happening between them in the near future, even cringed at the thought. But the trip might just help her come back down to Earth from the completely wild day it had been. In fact, she was fairly confident a dose of maternal smothering would effectively squash the libido The Doctor’s antics had ignited. She could discuss things with him when she got back, when she was more level-headed to do so.

His room was empty, but she found him the second place she looked: the library.

“Doctor?” she half-whispered a safe distance from where he was sprawled across the floor with half a dozen rather large volumes of something she couldn’t make out, bespectacled and deeply engrossed in the contents of one.

“Rose!” he gasped, the book in his hands jumping a few inches into the air in his surprise. He caught it gracelessly, several pages flapping and creasing as it slowly tumbled to the ground. He stood and trampled over two others and she heard the rip of several pages that he didn’t seem to care about.

“Hello,” he started in a quieter tone. “I was just, uhm, doing some reading, but I was gonna come and – see you in a second.”

“What for?” she snarked.

“Listen, Rose, I’m –”

“You’re sorry, I know,” she snapped. “Look, can you take me home?” The anger was definitely amplifying in his presence and it was definitely starting to seep out. His face fell even more despondent at her question than her interruption as he halted the slow steps he’d been taking towards her.

“What?” he asked quietly, and he looked like a kicked puppy and she hated herself.

“Yeah, I just… want to go and see my mum.” She tried to sound calm and impartial. He relaxed only slightly.

“For how long?” he asked, anxious and repeatedly balling up his fists and releasing them again.

“Just the night,” she shrugged. He sighed out his relief, his posture losing its rigidity in an instant.

“The whole night?” he asked, still cautious.

“Yeah, think so.” She wasn’t thinking that before, in her room. Why did she tell him that? What exactly was she trying to accomplish here? It wasn’t her intention to make him sad, or jealous, but she seemed to be achieving that anyway. Some selfish instinct was controlling her tongue; some rejected part of her subconscious craved to twist the knife she knew was already cutting him.

“Ok,” he nodded several times in agreement before he breathed another deep sigh.

“When?” he asked. She knew he meant what day or time she wanted to land.

“The same day as yesterday, if we could. I figure it’d be nice to cheer her up since I’m goin’
anyway.”

“Ok,” he said again, simple. He closed off soon after that, all the hurt in his face recoiling to inside his head, his hands retreating to his pockets and his posture straightening to one of detached objectivity.

“’Bout dinner time, I guess,” she added. He only nodded before walking past her and through the door to the hall.

She lagged behind him, knowing he was upset and that she was too, and she wasn’t sure how to remedy the situation just yet. The engines roared to life in only a few short seconds once he’d taken control of the console, but still she lingered a few feet behind him.

“Can I… come with you?” he asked, slowly swiveling around to see her. His eyes contained a glimmer of hope but didn’t betray any other emotion.

“I dunno,” she wavered. “I thought you didn’t even like my mum.”

“Please?” She had no idea why he wouldn’t pursue her when she’d retreated to her room, but the idea of her leaving the TARDIS altogether was somehow radically different.

“I dunno,” she repeated. “Are you gonna talk this time? Or just give me some more cryptic answers?”

“What do you mean?” He asked like he truly didn’t know, crossing his arms in puzzlement.

“I just… wish you’d be more honest with me.”

“What do you want to know?” he asked.

“I want to know what you’re thinkin’!” she couldn’t help raising her voice out of frustration.

“Right now?” He raised an eyebrow to question her sanity. He was just like human men, thick as mud when it came to anything vaguely emotional. She wasn’t ready to have this argument, but he was testing her patience and she was breaking.

“No,” she scoffed. “Doctor, everything that’s happened. I wanna know what’s going on with you. Whatever’s holdin’ you back, just… tell me what’s on your mind.” Yep, it was all gushing out. She supposed she’d been waiting for him to ask; the real reason she was upset was because their unsatisfactory communication, after all. He was silent for a moment, slowly nodding in acknowledgement as he turned his gaze away from her heated inquiry.

“Rose, it’s not that simple,” he responded, a flicker of irritation entering his tone.

“What is it? D’you not trust me?”

“It’s not you,” he growled, pointing an insistent finger at her.

“’S not you, it’s me? Really? You’re gonna play that one?”

“No, I’m not playing anything, I’m serious.” His darkened eyes would have frightened anyone but her, his voice barely contained, fury and aggravation seething from every word.

“Doctor, if you think this is ever gonna work,” she gestured to them both, “you can’t keep… keepin’ secrets and lyin’ to me!” His fingers twisted through his hair as he processed her accusations.
“I’m not lying, I just don’t know how to explain.”

“Well, ya haven’t even tried!”

“If we go too far, you’ll get everything. All of me. And I don’t know if I can handle that.” She felt no satisfaction from guessing correctly.

“Well, fine, ’cause I only wanted part of you anyway! Maybe a part that would actually follow through on the teasin’!” It was sarcastic and scathing and she was well aware of that, but couldn’t stop herself.

“You have no idea what you’ll see. What you’re asking me to show you!” They were both stumbling past line between conversing and shouting, both their internal frustrations finding an unfortunate outlet in each other.

“Maybe I would, if you’d tell me!” she snapped.

“There’s too much in my head, I don’t even know where to start!” His hands flailed above his head in an effort to describe his jumbled thoughts.

“And – ” He started another thought only to be interrupted by his own angrily huffed breaths. She took a deep breath and dropped her gaze from his stimulating glare to the grating of the console to still her shaking limbs and quiet her tone before pursuing him.

“And?” she asked.

He trailed a hand down his face as he stared at the jumpseat, and swallowed hard to muster the courage to speak or calm himself or some combination of the two. He spoke slowly, carefully.

“I’m afraid what might happen if I do.” His exasperation had transformed to innocent honesty so quickly she was blindsided. She stomped down on her own anger in the hope of addressing his now pressing fear without a trace of it.

“What, you think I’m gonna leave you or something?” His eyes returned to hers as he responded only with a hopeless grimace.

“Doctor, ‘m not goin’ anywhere,” she vowed with renewed calm. Even when she was as angry with him as humanly possible, she still wouldn’t go anywhere, not really. Or, not permanently.

“You say that now.” She wanted to tell him she loved him, more than she’d ever loved anyone before. But they were still separated by the fiery air of insults they didn’t mean, and it was her fault. Definitely not the right moment.

“And I’ll say it again later, if I have to.” After a moment of hesitance she closed the distance she’d kept between them and grasped his hand in hers. “So you might as well tell me.”

The fear didn’t leave his eyes even as he squeezed her hand briefly in return.

“I don’t know where to start,” he repeated his earlier sentiment barely above a whisper. She couldn’t stand it; she just wanted to lift whatever burden he was carrying from his back and sling it over her own so he never had to be weighted down by it again.

“I’m just tryin’ to help,” she reassured him, swiping her thumb across his hand soothingly. “But I can’t if I don’t know anything.” She didn’t miss the quiver of his lip at her words before he dropped his head to stare obstinately at his trainers as he spoke next.
“I know,” he sighed. “I’m sorry, for everything. I’m no good at this.” His words were quiet, hesitant, but inside she knew his brain was firing at a million miles a minute, sifting through everything she’d said and accused him of and trying to process it all coupled with whatever tumult was already present.

“No, I’m sorry too. I shouldn’t have got so angry. I didn’t mean what I said about… wantin’ part of you. Of course I want all of you,” she tried to reassure him. She felt so guilty about that particular outburst she had to apologize at the first opportunity.

“It’s alright,” is what he said. But he chuckled humorlessly to the floor, tilting his head in a way that implied she should have been angry. Like he expected her to be angry with him. She could never quite seem to figure him out.

“I can’t just jump right into what you want to hear. We’ll have to start small.” His pragmatism was taking the lead where his emotions had lost control, steering them away from more arguing and towards some resemblance of a plan. Though, he didn’t mention what he had in mind by ‘small.’ She ventured a guess.

“Can you tell me about home?” she asked, testing his sensitivity to the topic. He looked up, his eyes still revealing his fear and uncertainty as his thoughts visibly churned, his eyebrows pulling together. His features were so troubled for such a long moment she had no choice but to turn away regretting the question, her empty hand nervously covering her mouth as she stared at the console.

He surprised her again. With a small tug of his hand on hers, he lured her towards him, and when her feet remained cemented to the floor, he settled a hand on the small of her back to pull her comfortably against him, her cheek nestling against his collarbone as he rested his chin on her head. When she mimicked him to wrap her arm around his back, suddenly they were reminiscing their dance, their hands still linked as they subconsciously swayed to each side a couple times. She was less concerned with him answering her question and just enjoyed the gentleness of the moment, thankful the row hadn’t unfolded into something stronger with greater consequences.

“Yeah,” he breathed after a long moment. “Yeah, I can.”

The TARDIS was quiet, only the metallic breathing that she was accustomed to echoing through the room. They must have landed when they weren’t paying attention. The heat of their argument dissipated as they held each other, reclaiming a sense of tranquility in each other’s arms, and after a few minutes Rose was prepared to fall asleep standing against his chest. She disrupted their intimacy to avoid the falling-asleep-on-him bit.

“Come on, then,” she pulled away from him but kept her hand firmly in his. “Tell me on the walk.” His returning smile was hesitant and unconvincing.

He broke from her hand only to fetch his coat from where it was strewn over a coral. And she couldn’t help musing to herself how the coat didn’t match his now black slacks, and the ensemble seemed incomplete without the pinstriped jacket.

“Well,” he started with a pensive sigh. “A little more classical, Gallifrey. Worked a bit more like one big royal society. The Time Lords being the royals.”

“Not everyone was Time Lord, then?”

“Nope. It was a special title. Reserved for what you might call the upper class.”

“How’d you earn it?”
“I didn’t, not really. It got sort of passed on. Through the family, I guess you could say.”

“What were they like?”

“Well, my dad was sort of an outsider. He disagreed with a lot of the philosophy spreading through the ruling circles. And my mum was…” his voice cracked, but he cleared his throat to hide it, “… human.” That explained so simply why he had such a fondness for humans: it extended even before he had no choice but to stick with them. “And, uhm, my brother, he was – ” he stopped, staring off into nothing for a moment before snarling in frustration as he hid his face in his hands. He breathed deeply a few times out of her sight, and when he revealed his eyes again, it was hardly noticeable to someone who didn’t know him. But she picked up the light pink glisten that cleared easily as he blinked a handful of times.

“’S alright,” she rejoined him immediately and placed a cautious hand on his arm. “Don’t talk about people, yeah? How ‘bout just the planet?”

He nodded, and after a moment he started to churn out random facts about scenery and geography, that didn’t seem to flow together very well, as they stepped out the doors and into the Doctor’s well-timed second sunset of the day.

It was only about five minutes into their stroll down the street towards the Powell Estate that Rose realized she should have put on a more appropriate coat. The light jacket she selected didn’t suffice to keep the chilled wind from making her shiver. The Doctor shed his reluctance and gained enthusiasm as he went on describing his planet, apparently uncompromised as long as he didn’t talk of people who’d been close to him.

“… you’d see orange skies instead of blue, ‘cause of the different atmospheric composition. Plains of red grass, snow-capped mountains in the distance, forests with silver leaves that shined in the summer like they’d caught fire. Lots of deserts, mostly with red sand. Not as many bodies of water, or as much rainfall as here on Earth - ” he noticed she had disentangled her arm from his in favor of hugging both arms to her chest from warmth, protection against the windy evening. It was certainly a change from the warm ocean air they’d recently departed from.

“Cold?” he asked, breaking from his reverie.

“Yeah… ‘m sorry. Maybe we could go back and I could pick up something a bit warmer?” she entreated.

“Nah, no need,” he replied, shrugging out of his coat. He stopped them both walking so he could put it over her shoulders and help her slip her arms into the sleeves.

“Thanks,” she whispered gratefully as she drew it up against her neck to stop the wind from biting her skin and closed the front around her stomach, quickly absorbing the heat from the Doctor’s body that still lingered inside the material. It was actually quite heavy, as the material was thick (definitely wind-proof and clearly designed for someone taller than she was. But she was comfortable, and couldn’t help feeling like the coat was hugging her, as though it had sentience, which she knew was rubbish. It must have just been her imagination transferring the comfort the Doctor often brought her into his coat. Her hands didn’t quite poke out from the sleeves, and as they began to walk again she realized it was dragging along the sidewalk.

“Oh, no.”

“What is it?” he asked, as of yet oblivious to her observation.
“Look,” she said as she pointed to the ground where a few inches of the bottom rested on the concrete.

“Oh, that’s alright. TARDIS can clean it right up,” and he continued walking, unperturbed.

“But… I thought you loved this coat,” she argued back, though stepping with him all the same.

“I do! Janis Joplin gave me that coat!”

“See? I can’t… what if it gets ruined?”

“Rose. I’m not that materialistic. Aren’t you more important than a couple inches of an overcoat?”

“Well, I dunno,” she deliberated for a quick moment on the best reply to such a loaded question. “Am I?” Turning it back on him. Good plan. His feet stopped in their tracks as he turned to face her, and she followed suit.

“Course you are,” he replied without hesitation, and she couldn’t help but giggle. He actually giggled right back, his tongue peeking out of his mouth slightly as it tended to when he was particularly content. He placed one hand on her shoulder, the other to lift her chin as he leaned down for a short but tender kiss. His arm draped around her shoulders as he left her lips, leaving them especially icy after sharing the warmth of his, as he started them walking again.

It would take her some time to get used to this. The street wasn’t bustling, but there were enough people wandering about that one of them must have noticed their public display of affection. It was such a marked change from the nearly two-year, strict no-touching policy, she thought of how it would all look a bit sudden from an outsider’s perspective. In spite of her rebellious hormones telling her otherwise, she supposed she could see a positive side to the Doctor requesting more time before advancing them even further. Though, she had no idea just how much time that would entail. But the talking was good – excellent, even. And, honestly, she was eager to hear more about Gallifrey. He never opened up about it, and she had avoided asking essentially the whole time she traveled with him.

“Go on, then, tell me more,” she urged him on.

“Right. Where was I?”

“Less water than on Earth.”

“Oh, yes. Well, like I said, dry, for the most part. But there were a handful of rivers, oh, like the Lethe! No one on Earth knows this, of course, but it actually shares a name with the river that runs through the underworld according to Greek mythology. ‘The river of forgetfulness.’ It’s in the works of Ovid, Dante… Wouldn’t it be brilliant to meet Dante in person!? Maybe we take a trip to pre-Renaissance Italy…” he beamed, sidetracked already at the prospect of their next adventure.

“Anyway, one of our kind was exiled to Earth after too much intergalactic interference. It was a common punishment back in the day. Took the name Virgil.”

“No, you’re kidding me,” she gaped, throwing a hand against his chest to stop him.

“I am not! Check your textbooks. No one really knows where he was born, where he came from, who his parents were. He blended in pretty well with the natives, and used some inspiration from our own planet as he made up some mythology for this one. I think he found it quite funny.”

“Doctor, are you serious?” she asked again in shock. “Has this happened often, Time Lords just poppin’ over to change Earth’s history?”
“Well, he didn’t change Earth’s history, per se…”

“Doctor.” She wasn’t having any of his usual hedging.

“Occasionally, yeah.”

“Oh my God! Weren’t there laws against that, or something?”

“Well, yeah, they often got in trouble. I mean, we just got bored sometimes. You know me, always up for an adventure. It’s in our blood, I suppose.” He was so nonchalant about it, she could smack him. It made her feel like an insect next to a god, since, apparently, he spawned from one of the very people who helped shape the course of the entire Greek culture. And she remembered enough from history classes to know that Greek culture went on to affect later civilizations for hundreds of years. The Time Lords seemed to be more advanced in every way, and it was difficult to think of herself on his level whenever she got new bits of information like this. But she couldn’t let on, not when he was finally opening up. She had to let him continue. Luckily, he skipped over her silence without prodding her for more opinions.

“Anyway, there’s the Lethe, the Cadonflood that runs through the southern mountains, then there’s Abydos Lake, filled with fish that could sing. Not with proper voices or words or anything, but… more like a bird, or a whale, their songs had their own unique sound. It was how they communicated with each other.”

“Well, ’s not the strangest thing I’ve heard.”

“Nope, not even close.”

“Where did you live?” she inquired.

“The Capitol,” he replied after inhaling a deep breath. “Right between the mountains of Solace and Solitude. A great, big, shielded bubble of a city, where all the Time Lords gathered. It was like the King Louis’ palace of Gallifrey.” He was silent for a long moment after that, clearly pondering something unknown to her. “Still. Even that gets old after a few centuries. Stole a TARDIS, flew away, and, well, here I am.”

“You stole a TARDIS? A TARDIS?”

“Yeah,” he said simply.

“There’s more than one?”

“Oh, there were thousands. Millions even. They were war ships… later on.”

“Didn’t you get into trouble?”

“Oh, yes.” He gave her a devilish wink.

“You’re mad, you are,” pushing against him teasingly with her shoulder. He clicked his tongue playfully in affirmation of her accusation. Typical.

“Hmm, and aside from the Capitol,” he went on, “there’s also Arcadia, I also spent a lot of time there. One of the bigger cities on the planet. Always humming. My kind of place.”

“Doctor, how long’s it been since… you were there?” She avoided using language that implied the war, knowing better than to bring it up too soon. He turned his head to look to her, still apparently
sobered by her inquiry despite the delicate language. He considered for a moment before responding.

“As long as you’ve traveled with me, plus a couple years.”

“So, when we met, it had already been a few years since…” she trailed off, tiptoeing around the subject they both knew was suspended in the atmosphere between them. She was anxious to know what lurked in the darkness he fought so hard to keep from her, to get an explanation for the flashes of images she saw so unexpectedly in their earlier throes of passion. But she couldn’t push him. One step at a time.

“Actually, not exactly. You might not believe this, but… remember when I first asked you to come with me?” And I said no, she finished in her head. Stupidest thing I ever did.

“Yeah,” she affirmed, keeping her thoughts tucked away.

“Well, when I came back the second time, it seemed like a few seconds to you, but I was actually gone about twenty months.”

“Seriously?” she asked, bewildered again. She wasn’t sure she could handle another piece of groundbreaking information in one day. She actually considered changing the subject to bananas for a brief moment.

“Yeah. Didn’t have a very good time.”

“What made you come back after all that time?” she asked, suddenly provoked by a new thought. This meant that for twenty months, give or take, he remembered the stupid ape girl who he tolerated for two days that one time he had to deal with walking mannequins. It meant she misinterpreted their first meeting very much, that his affection for her extended further into the past than she thought.

“Someone gave me a bit of advice, said I needed someone with me. You were the first person that came to mind.”

“Didn’t forget about me?” she prodded, needing to hear him tell her exactly.

“How could I have forgetten you? You yelled at me, drove me completely mad… but you were beautiful, funny, brave… and you saved my life.” She was the one to stop them this time, taking his face in both hands to kiss him as he turned to her. And it was a hundred thank you’s and I love you’s that she pressed against his lips with her own, because in that moment the words were frozen on her tongue, unable to be spoken aloud. He responded in kind, his hands taking her waist to pull her snugly against him. She pulled away only on remembering they were not in the secure privacy of the TARDIS, but in plain sight to any passersby.

“Can I show you?” he asked after a moment of gazing at her. She wasn’t exactly sure what he meant to show her, but she was in no position to turn him down regardless of his ambiguity.

“Yeah,” she nodded. Her heart rate accelerated instantly, butterflies ricocheted through her stomach and her entire chest at the mystery of what was about to happen. He’d never used telepathy to purposefully show her anything.

“This might… look a bit weird,” he said, eyes darting in all directions, scoping out their surroundings. “Is it alright if I kiss you again?” She had to agree it would seem strange to onlookers, though the streets weren’t particularly crowded, as she noted before.

“Sure,” she replied warily, hoping this wasn’t just a ruse to get to snog her again. But as soon as his lips came in contact with hers, he placed his hands gently on her face, his palms on her cheeks while
his fingers rested on her temples. Only a handful of seconds passed before it started.

A nearly empty, dingy alley materialized behind her lids, and she was staring out at herself and Mickey from just within the TARDIS doors, through the Doctor’s eyes. The night she first turned down his offer. Following her swift refusal, as he stepped back through the doors and into solitude, the waves of emotion crashed over her. The greenish-blue interior of the TARDIS took on a red tinge as anger overwhelmed him: merciless rage towards the Daleks that still possessed his mind mingled with frustration with himself that he couldn’t convince her to come with him and created a deadly combination.

Isolation followed hard upon that, a debilitating loneliness as he was greeted by nothing but a vacant TARDIS devoid of any life but his own once again, no one to turn to for comfort. Guilt overcame him most of all, an all-consuming contrition, a drive to repent, to satisfy the compelling need for forgiveness, but he was struck with the acute awareness that there was no one alive who could grant it to him. *Forgiveness from what?* she asked herself ephemerally.

The Doctor’s lips were motionless against hers, his face tense against hers as he experienced the memories and raw emotions again with her, but he remained focused.

The pace of the high-definition dream quickened when he first made the decision to leave the quiet seclusion of the vortex and seek at least a palliative cure for his emotional distress. He somehow blundered into a sword fight with a pack of potato-looking suited aliens that made her recall his challenge to the Sycorax leader. A young brunette woman saved him from being sliced to bits before handing him a bit of paper, saying something about homework she couldn’t quite make out. She appeared a few more times as he traveled on, but was much younger, as though somehow they crossed paths out of order.

And suddenly there was a battlefield, dimmed by smoke and made grisly by the injured soldiers strewn about in what seemed to be a crude medical setup. Her anxiety skyrocketed at the sight of the Doctor in such a dangerous setting, though even that wasn’t the most life-threatening situation he’d been in. With the help of the screwdriver he lent some of his medical expertise without speaking or revealing himself to others, and the scene disappeared as quickly as it came.

She looked on helplessly as President Kennedy waved his last from a convertible car before being gunned down from amidst a crowd of frightened and screaming onlookers, much more morbid and ear-piercing than watching the low-quality footage she remembered from high school.

He stood near the bustling dock of the infamous Titanic as she prepared for her maiden voyage, his mind tortured with indecision on whether to stop it from sinking. He could easily sneak aboard and alert the watchmen with enough time to steer clear of the chunk of ice that doomed thousands to their death. Become a savior, begin to redeem himself… *from what?* she wondered momentarily again. But that view swirled to black as well, as she expected; the ship did sink, after all.

A pulse-pounding concoction of terror and excitement surged through him as volcano exploded at close proximity, the ground trembling as rocks, ash, and boiling red spewed from its top. The Doctor sprinted the opposite direction back to the safety of the TARDIS. On a planet Rose didn’t recognize, he met a human-looking girl about Rose’s age, but with something about her not completely human. The Doctor took her to an ancient city on Earth to foil the plans of some angry bloke trying to destroy the world again, unsurprisingly.

Ali, *that’s her name*, and it was her current Doctor’s voice speaking to her as though aloud, but she quickly realized it hadn’t been, but rather he was capable of speaking directly inside her head. Ali mentioned Rose’s name in conversation, and soon the Doctor was back in the TARDIS, tearing through the vortex with a new rush of hope that she hadn’t felt through the duration of the
experience.

It was herself the Doctor saw as he opened the door once more, standing in the same alley with her stupid lump of a boyfriend in the same spot she had been all that time ago. Yet it was only seconds to her. “Did I mention, it also travels in time?” the Doctor asked. This time she accepted, briefly kissing Mickey on the cheek before dashing into the mysterious blue box with the stranger she only met the night before. An entirely different tenor swept over the memory; an invigorating, blindingly bright joy pervaded the dimly glowing room to replace the miserable, bleak shadows that had dominated it for what seemed to him like ages.

Comforted to have a companion even if only temporarily, and thrilled that that companion was Rose, who so enthralled and charmed him when they met all those months ago, he beamed at her from across the console as he prepared to ask her where she wanted to go first. The visions faded to black and she stared at nothing but her eyelids once more.

The Doctor’s lips came to life against hers, no longer stationary and serving only as a cover for their telepathic affair, as his hands shifted slightly lower to cradle her cheeks between them. Gratitude flowed from his lips to hers with each tender kiss, gratitude that she came and that she stayed, even when he constantly put her life in danger, even now that she started to discover his deeply buried past. It was his relief that spread through her body, relief to hold her in his hands after evoking the memory of the period that his former self traveled the stars in solitude, only dreaming of having her by his side. But, as a gentleman, he pulled away after a few moments rather than escalate their touches and ravish her in the middle of the street, his hands falling to her shoulders.

She opened her eyes at last to find that the night had begun to set in, chasing the warm colors of the lingering rays of sunlight over the horizon. She guessed it had been less than ten minutes that they were engaged in their thoughts, but supposed sunsets were rather fleeting and usually it grew dark within minutes after the first glimpse of orange and pink hues in the sky. But she had no idea where to even begin to speak.

“Doctor,” she started, wanting to at least alert him that she was still capable of speech and her mind seemed to retain functionality. He waited for her to complete her thought, eyes roaming over her face in the gradually diminishing light. Her breathing had accelerated, that much she could tell, perhaps her metabolism kicked into high gear to accommodate the onslaught of new sensations she had to process in such a short window of time. Somewhat paradoxically, though she acquired a substantial amount of new information about the Doctor, and was delighted he was willing to share it in such an intimate fashion, it also left her with more questions than she had before. She had to prioritize.

“Thank you,” she managed to get out, placing that sentiment above the others consuming her mind, and knowing it was important he heard it from her. Still he didn’t verbally respond, only gave her a weak smile upon hearing her appreciation. He looked so vulnerable. Like whatever her next words were could shatter him to pieces right then.

“Can you – so, at the end, did you – ” she struggled to phrase her question tactfully, and ended up just gesturing from his head to her own, hoping he understood what she was getting at.

“Yeah,” he answered simply, with a small nod. “Not just memories, emotions, too. I hope that’s ok.” She marveled at how desperately he sought for her to approve of of the intimate bond that had just been formed and broken between them. As though she could possibly refuse to accept him in his entirety, psychic abilities included. It was innate; it was biology for him, something he couldn’t change about himself. All the same, she knew instantly how frightened he was that she might reject this aspect of him, might ask him to revert back to a hands-off, simpler way of life. Like that could ever happen.
“Of course,” she affirmed with as much sincerity in her voice as she could manage, staring into his eyes that were darkening with the night. “It was beautiful. I mean – not all of it – it was painful, too. Doctor, you were hurtin’ so much. And it made me – ” she winced, recalling the intensity of the suffering he shared with her as moisture began to blur the edges of her vision. “Why didn’t you come back sooner?”

“I thought… you didn’t want to come,” he replied hesitantly as his hands fell from her shoulders, one pulling back to drag along the nape of his neck, signature of his anxiety. “I didn’t exactly make a great impression. And, besides, life with me is dangerous. Really, anytime I ask someone to come along, I’m being selfish, neglecting their own well-being.” She didn’t quite believe his alibi, but elected to ignore the self-effacing comment.

“M sorry, Doctor. For turnin’ you down the first time. ’Specially knowing what I know now.”

“Ah, no need to apologize,” he replied with a wave of his hand. “It was only a few seconds to you. Although… I am a bit offended that I had to seduce you with the words ‘travels in time’ before you’d come with me.”

Her face fell, recalling the argument they had all those months ago, when his former self had accused her of using him for her own time-traveling agenda.

“Doctor,” she started but her voice died away, at a loss for how to console him.

“Was it the ears?” he asked, flicking at one of his own as an indication, a trace of a smile on his lips.

“No,” she chortled only slightly.

“What, then?” he asked, serious now. “All of space wasn’t enough, had to have time, too?”

“Doctor, stop it.” She mirrored his solemn tone and expression. “Even if the time-travelin’ thing was what made me decide to come, ’s not why I decided to stay.” She poked him in the chest on the last word for clarification, and he was already grinning back at her. Because, oh, he knew. At the latest, he finally understood on Krop Tor, when she made it clear she didn’t want to leave him even when they thought they’d lost the TARDIS. Hopefully he had figured it out even before then. And she realized, even if he knew, he needed reassurance. He had no one else to give it to him; right now she was all he had, besides the ship. Which she was fairly sure couldn’t talk to him, but that was way too embarrassing of a question to ask either of them, she supposed.

For some reason, he couldn’t understand why she wanted to stay with him. It was a question he asked in different words and versions over and over. It was the abnormally low sense of self-worth she’d caught glimpses of now and then, though his external charisma and confidence in this incarnation would never reveal it to anyone but herself. Something terrible happened in that war, of that much she was certain. What she couldn’t figure out was what could be worse than having your entire race killed and living to tell about it. But whatever it was, he still endeavored to keep it from her. And she wouldn’t nag him about it, not when he made his aversion so obvious. He so did not want to talk about it that he ran out of the room to get away from her when she’d seen… whatever she saw. The scene was still a constant tug at the back of her mind, nonetheless, and she was grateful he had unmistakably pushed them in the direction of more, rather than less, communication.

“C’mon, then,” he said, turning to face the sidewalk and extending his hand to her. She laced her fingers through his as they walked, only about half a mile yet to her flat.

“So, why Kennedy?” she asked, hoping he would pick up on the multiple implications behind her question. He sighed.
“That was just one of many failed attempts to save people, honestly.”

“Failed attempts – like, you tried to stop him from getting murdered?”

“Well, not really. Chickened out is more like it. Almost everything I did, or tried to do, in those twenty months, was mess with fixed points in time.”

“Fixed points?”

“There are certain events in history that are fixed. They have to happen, or something like what happened with your dad would happen, there’d be a wound in time. Everything else is in flux, anything can happen. But I thought maybe, since the keepers of time were gone, maybe I could do some good for the universe to counteract the bad. But it never worked out. I was concentrating so hard on finding Kennedy’s killer I let him push past me from behind without knowing. I might have helped make it happen, now.”

“Doctor, don’t say that. ‘S not your fault. ‘S the one who fired the shot, and that’s it.”

“If someone else was standing where I’d been, maybe they’d have stopped him.”

“Oi, I said stop it with that attitude!” she nearly yelled, baffled at how he could twist anything into being his fault. He shrugged, but didn’t continue the line of thought.

“So with the Titanic and the volcano, I backed out. Afraid I might inadvertently cause more trouble.”

“You stopped that one alien bloke,” she reminded him.

“Well,” he trailed off, his unique way of agreeing with a compliment.

They were both fairly quiet the rest of the way, occasionally glancing to the brightening stars as the sky darkened, occasionally stealing looks at each other beneath the glow of a street lamp. Eloquence was lost to her, still disoriented by the flood of someone else’s sorrow and rage. Bewildered by the tangible evidence that it was because of her that started to change, started to heal. Frustrated she couldn’t ease his insecurity. Angry that she couldn’t compete with what he’d given to her. She couldn’t show him how he meant the world to her, how much she’d needed a daring hand to rescue her from a meaningless life, the excitement he shared with her every day, the sense of purpose she found traveling with him. Even the most carefully constructed prose would pale in comparison to his ability, and she’d end up sounding like an idiot. She had to find some other way, and it wasn’t going to come to her within a couple minutes.

She knocked on their front door loudly a couple times.

“Mum? It’s us,” she called before keying them in, not wanting to startle her with their surprise visit.
“S’pose I should have phoned first,” Rose sighed as she leaned against the wall next to him. He’d realized in a matter of seconds Jackie wasn’t in the Tylers’ cramped flat, but he’d watched silently as Rose emerged from the last room she decided to check (her own) and joined him in the hall where he lingered, certain she didn’t want him following at her heels. She seemed more disappointed than he’d expected; he guessed she had truly been looking forward to seeing her as an escape from all the madness he’d brought about within a day. The sore lack of communication, the tango drunk on sugar and salty air, the persistent spike of hormones in her circulation that he’d inadvertently provoked, the heated row, and the psychic onslaught… to name a few.

“Well, we could… stay for a bit. See if she turns up,” he offered.

“M sure she will. She hardly goes out for dinner,” she replied, agreeable to his idea. “But what are we gonna do ‘til she gets back?” she asked, turning towards him and fidgeting with his sleeve.

He could only choke in response and he cleared his throat several times to cover it. He might have managed a few ‘ums’ in between, but couldn’t be sure. He was certain she wasn’t purposefully putting on an air of seduction, but the way her voice had quieted since they entered the empty flat, combined with the dim lighting in the hall, produced that effect nonetheless. Before she could unwittingly entice him to pin her against the wall and actualize one of his many long-suppressed fantasies, he pulled his eyes away from her frame and concentrated on the opposite wall. His hands buried themselves in his pockets as he struggled to think of something they could do that didn’t involve a wall, a bed, or the couch within his line of sight. But Rose’s painfully accurate accusation regarding teasing still stung in his ears, and soon she was scoffing at his blatant discomfort.

“Doctor, calm down,” she said, annoyed. “We could always make my mum dinner. ’M not very hungry, but I’m sure she will be.”

It was something he never would have agreed to a year ago. And, truthfully, he wasn’t all that hungry, either. Well, not for food anyway. But really, he had to get used to these close proximity activities. They were just as often alone together in the TARDIS as they were venturing about time and space. Where had all his self-control gone, anyway? He was vaguely aware he would be tearing down painstakingly constructed walls the last few days as they danced and kissed and shared a bed (or couch), but he didn’t anticipate it being so impossible for him to reconstruct those walls to even a fraction of their original height. He was like a helpless moth blundering through smoky air, fighting uselessly to keep away from the warmth and light of the summer campfire that blazed wherever Rose stood. And yet, cooking dinner (which was something they often did in the TARDIS anyway, though she has considerably more advanced technology to facilitate the process), and perhaps
spending a bit more time around her mother than he fancied, was hardly anything to ask of him. Not when he was already holding back so much from her that he could quite literally kick himself.

“Oh, alright then,” he said with exaggerated resignation she hoped she could recognize wasn’t authentic. “But what are we gonna cook?” he asked, raising his voice from their cautious whispering and rolling his head to the side to look at her again.

“I dunno,” she shrugged, eyeing him tentatively, the hand on his sleeve pulling back to timidly cover her mouth. He broke the awkwardness without hesitation.

“Well, let’s go and see, shall we?” he raised his eyebrows playfully and turned abruptly on his heels to stride for the kitchen, knowing she would follow once he had indicated some level of enthusiasm for the task. He opened the refrigerator to find a half a jar of pickles, a container of takeaway, a liter of soda, assorted condiments, a jug of expired milk, and a questionable pack of hot dogs. He frowned just as he felt Rose approach from behind him. She wrapped her arms around his waist as she peered around him to inspect the contents herself.

“Well, that’s no good,” she remarked almost instantly.

“No,” he agreed somberly, letting go of the door and allowing it to shut itself, opening the door to the freezer instead. Some chocolate ice cream, waffles, and a handful of single-serve frozen pizzas. He let that door shut closely upon the first.

“Yeah, this happens sometimes,” she said, loosening her arms from around him as he turned to face her. “She puts off shoppin’ until the last minute. ‘S probably where she is now.”

“Well,” he began, hands tracing down her arms until his fingers naturally twined with hers. Holding hands didn’t send him into a sudden and fierce desperation for her like kissing did: it was innocent, something they’d always done since the day they met. He scanned the countertops for anything promising, but found them as barren as the cold storage.

“We could always make the frozen pizzas.” He tried to seem amenable in case that was something she was accustomed to, but his expression must have betrayed his distaste for the idea. Rose was laughing as soon as the words left his mouth.

“‘M sorry, Doctor, do we not adequately cater to your very sophisticated palate?” she asked, a playful smirk negating the feigned offense in her tone.

“Ooo, I’m afraid not,” he answered, equally light.

She laughed slightly, but the sound and the accompanying smile quickly faded as they were overtaken by a rather large yawn.

“Sleepy?” he teased, though in truth he had been waiting for her to show signs of crashing since they stepped outside the TARDIS. If his calculations were correct (which they seldom weren’t), she’d been awake for sixteen hours already.

“Oi, it’s been an eventful day.” Yes, and on top of that, it had been an eventful day. But he’d slept more the past two nights than he had in months, so he couldn’t say he felt quite the same. Earlier, he’d been too wound up from their snogging and her frustration with him to even consider resting his eyes, but their argument and what little he’d had a chance to show her on their walk were a bit of a weight off his shoulders. He was more than ready to settle into something soft for the night, so long as it was nestled next to Rose Tyler.

“I know,” he breathed, rubbing his thumbs in soothing circles over her palms as he acknowledged
the truth of her statement. “I’m a bit knackered myself.”

“Thought you wouldn’t be able to sleep tonight?” she asked, throwing his earlier statement back in his face.

“Well,” he started, second-guessing whether he should reveal his motivating factor. “Maybe not to sleep, exactly. But, well, the past few nights, with you… they’ve been nice.” Nice? Did he have to sound so daft at crucial moments like these? “Thought maybe you’d like to capitalize on some more time with my cuddling skills… if you want. I promise, no teasing,” he added, pressing one of their linked hands over his chest to seal his oath. She bit her bottom lip in an attempt to hide her smile, humming softly as she deliberated his proposal.

“Well, we could always… come back in a few days. My mum’s probably busy anyway. Lots of groceries to buy, apparently. We could… head back to the TARDIS now?” she asked, raising one eyebrow suggestively. Well, that was quick.

“Think we’ll have to. You definitely need your sleep.” He couldn’t bring himself to feel guilty when she was the one who suggested leaving prematurely.

It was at precisely the moment they made to walk out of the front door that Jackie walked into it. With groceries. A lot of groceries. A few brown paper bags tumbled into the hallway in her surprise and joy to see Rose. And that happiness seemed to carry over to her treatment of the Doctor himself – she didn’t quip at him like she normally did or steal less-than-friendly glances at him from across the hall. He smiled and nodded his way through her greetings and acknowledged it was a pleasure to see her, as well.

Jackie mentioned something about a meat-centered dish she planned to make for herself, and was intent on rambling through a list of options for dinner she could prepare when he interrupted her, insisting she leave the food preparation to Rose and himself. This was met with resistance, of course, and accusing him of insulting her cooking, but he used his most mollifying tone to explain he only meant she should relax, and that he and Rose had planned to cook before she arrived. She settled for finding something to watch on telly in the next room while they set to work.

Rose helped him put away any temperature-sensitive items while they brainstormed briefly based on the newly available selection, before deciding on fettucine alfredo with chicken (on Rose’s insistence) and broccoli (on his insistence).

“Iron, Rose. You could do with some more in your diet,” he argued as he heated the butter and half-and-half (he hoped it would suffice in place of heavy cream) over a saucepan. “And fiber. You want to end up with diverticulosis?” Perhaps he was a bit dramatic on that last bit. But was it really an ulterior motive that he wanted Rose to keep up optimal health?

“Oi! Doctor, don’t lecture me. ‘M not even hungry, I’ll eat maybe five bites of this. Blimey, we ate a salad for lunch!” He set up a second tray next to the one she was using to cut up said broccoli so he could dice up the chicken while the dairy-based fats did their simmering.

“Well, anyway, your mum will like it, trust me,” he said, taking a different approach. She sighed in exasperation.

“Well, I hope so,” she sighed, dubious of his statement.

“I think it was Julia Child that once said ‘butter makes everything better.’ She’s definitely right about that.”
“I happen to know that’s not true,” Rose quipped.

“It is true! Give me one good example of something that doesn’t taste better with a pat of butter.” She deliberated a moment, though the green florets continued to break off from the stem from under her knife.

“How ‘bout… bananas?”

“No, I think you’re forgetting about bananas foster. Banana slices covered in caramelized sugar and butter,” he drew out the word for emphasis. “First served by a French chef in 1951 at his New Orleans restaurant. Excellent dessert. Especially over ice cream. Vanilla. Maybe chocolate — ”

“Okay, turkey,” she interrupted his caramel-filled daydream.

“C’mon, Rose, people baste their Christmas turkeys with butter all the time.”

“Apples?”

“Apple pie. Loads of butter in pie crust. Though personally I prefer the Dutch variety with the crumbles on top… still, the crumbles are generally made of butter and brown sugar.”

“Chocolate?”

“Chip cookies!” he completed her thought, somehow on a roll with quick responses. “Plenty of butter in cookies.”

“Cereal,” she ventured, frustration growing in her tone. That one threw him a bit.

“Cereal… cereal, cereal, cereal… Rice! Those marshmallow bars with the rice cereal, what are they called? Had one from a coffee shop once. Molto bene! Much better than plain rice cereal, if you ask me.”

“They’re called rice crispy treats. I think. I mean, ‘s named after the cereal.” She huffed an irritated breath as she moved on to the last stalk of broccoli.

“Well? Anything else?” he asked, placing the finished chicken cutlets into a pan and turning his head to her.

“No,” she grumbled, avoiding his gaze.

“See? It’s like I said, butter makes everything better.”

“Wow, think it’s your greatest victory ever,” she said quietly, dripping with attitude. She faced her task as she rolled her eyes dramatically but he caught it.

“Oh, Rose! C’mon, I was only trying to get you to smile.” With a small pout he pleaded for her forgiveness as she turned to him on completing the chopping, hoping she wasn’t truly upset, but she only glared at him.

“Aw, Rose,” he drawled as he leaned over to her slowly, locking her gaze with a tiny grin, trying his best to break her. That failing, he stepped closer to brush his nose across hers a couple times, careful not to bring his sullied hands with him, pleading for her to love him even with his insistence on being right in trivial matters. To his delight, a smile broke from the edges of her lips despite how she tried to keep them sealed into a hard line.

“Okay, fine,” she said with a light laugh he returned. “Now wash those hands, you’ve got dead
“Well, you could have put it nicer, but you make a good point.” After he washed up he set to work sautéing the chicken and broccoli while Rose got the pasta boiling, and they took turns stirring the thickening cream-colored sauce. Once everything was coming together, he added some authentic parmigiano (and was impressed Jackie had bought the pricey cheese to begin with) to the alfredo until it seemed roughly the amount he estimated would provide the salty, tangy kick he was looking for. He dipped his index finger straight into the pan for a taste to see if it was an appropriate amount, but as soon as his finger was on his tongue, Rose interjected.

“Oh, Doctor!” she berated him before lowering her voice to just above a whisper. “That kind of stuff is alright back at the TARDIS, but my mum’s eatin’ this. Sure she wouldn’t appreciate you puttin’ your hands in everything.”

“Rose, what else could I do?” he replied only after sucking the sauce off his finger and deciding it, was indeed, the right amount of cheese. “Metal would throw off the taste. I can’t have utensils interfering. I have a very precise method for these things.”

“Well, guess what, Doctor?” she snarked as she reached into a nearby drawer. “That’s why we have wooden spoons.” She waved the large brown spoon in front of his face with a mocking smile. “See, look?” she continued, dipping the spoon into the saucepan until a fraction of it was coated with the yellowish cream. She blew on it lightly before bringing it to her lips to taste. “Simple. And tasty, too. Nice work on that sauce.”

“Hmm. Better than metal, I’ll give you that, but... there’s that annoying lignocellulose aftertaste.” His expression was one of disgust as he tossed it into the sink dramatically as soon as she handed it to him. “I’m telling you, finger’s the best way to go for tasting purposes. Well, provided you’ve washed. Which I have. Here.” Dipping his finger a second time into the sauce, he held it a couple inches from her lips. “Try it again.” Her eyes watched his carefully before she budged a centimeter, making sure he wasn’t joking or beginning to worry if he was mad, he couldn’t tell. But she closed her lips over the tip of his butter-coated finger, quickly sucking off most of the sauce he had scooped up, and swirling her tongue around it to lap up the rest. Even when no sauce could have remained detectable to her, she didn’t release him, instead pulling the whole digit into her mouth, sucking harder as she dragged her tongue along its length, as though reveling in the taste of his skin more than the alfredo sauce, and a second later her mouth was gone.

“Yeah. Does taste better.” Casual. As though she hadn’t just quite unfairly tantalized him.

“Yes, like I said,” attempting a similar cadence of nonchalance and closing his mouth, which had unknowingly fallen slightly open as he stared stupidly after her mouth, pining after the tongue behind it. He started combining the ingredients from their separate cooking vessels into the large saucepan they’d used for the noodles while Rose drifted to the sink to get a head start on the dishes.

In only a couple minutes they were at the table with Jackie. He nodded along in surprise and offered condolences as she retold the story about Elton, as he wasn’t supposed to have known about the incident. It was strange to be reminded of it when it seemed ages had passed between him and Rose since they’d seen the light-bulb-headed bloke. Shortly following that tale was the usual prodding of what they’d been up to, laced with implications he’d been taking advantage of her, as she had been suspicious of since the day she met him and slapped him across the face. It was always a bit of a wake-up call to keep his imagination in check, whenever she grilled him on their whereabouts and activities since the last time they met. They told her most of the truth, only lying by omission regarding near-death experiences (most notably the one he couldn’t believe was only days before) and the quite recent near-shagging experiences.
He was particularly wary not to let on that he and Rose had now or would have anytime in the foreseeable future a physical relationship. Without technically consulting Rose about it, he barred himself from holding her hand, resting his arm over her shoulder, and certainly kissing her, regardless of how benign he personally perceived said activities. Showing any indication their relationship had advanced since the last time they visited the flat would be a mistake. Surely Jackie still wouldn’t trust him to fill the position as Rose’s boyfriend, and he shuddered at the mere thought of the teenage-reminiscent word being applied to him in his nine-centuries-plus of life. Now certainly wasn’t the time to give her the freedom to imagine all the ways the pedo-alien could ravish her daughter in the coming months in his big, empty, alien ship.

When they’d finished eating, or more accurately for the pair of them, picked at the chicken and white noodles, Jackie offered to clean up. Rose thanked her, but the Doctor suggested it was about time they headed back, as it was nearly nine in the evening.

“We’ve got a bit of a walk. And an early trip tomorrow,” he explained, though they hadn’t actually discussed a thing about the following day’s journey.

“Oh, no,” she replied, despondent. “Can’t you stay the night, sweetheart?” she turned her attention to Rose, whose eyelids were drooping lazily as she rested her head in her hands over the table. “Look at you, you’re knackered.”

“Ohm… well,” she wavered, looking from her mum and back to him a couple times, though he could offer no secretive insights as they had no point of contact at the moment.

“Sure, I s’pose.” The Doctor’s eyes widened in surprise, expecting anything but for her to accept the invitation. “What d’you think, Doctor? Ready to turn in for the night?” She addressed him now, and didn’t seem to be joking. Jackie crossed her arms and waited for his response, her stare threatening to explode him on the spot. He stamped out the panic that her gaze kindled and blurted out the only solution that popped into his mind.

“Oh, uhm… that’s fine, Rose, I’ll just… head back to the TARDIS. I’ll park her out front first thing in the morning.”

“Suit, yourself, Doctor,” Jackie said as she spun around to walk into the kitchen, leaving him and Rose alone in the small dining room, just out of sight from the kitchen sink. “Glad you’re staying, Rose,” she added from several feet inside.

Rose threw her hands up in confusion as her mum disappeared from view, angrily mouthing What? He threw his hands in just as irritated a fashion and mouthing the same word back, and they proceeded to carry out a non-conversation of cryptic hand signals and snarled breaths before he decided they weren’t getting anywhere. He double-checked Jackie was out of sight and placed a hand on her cheek and met her eyes.

What’d you say yes for? he asked loud and clear in her mind.

She flinched at the unexpectedness of the unspoken question, and scowled at him to remind him she could neither respond in kind nor aloud. He sighed, recalculating the best yes or no question to ask. He didn’t want to lose her for the night, nor did he want to waltz into her bedroom with her with Jackie’s eyes burning a hole into his back from behind them. Then it occurred to him.

You have a window in your bedroom? He asked. She nodded slowly. Check it in five minutes. She hesitantly nodded a second time, though still clearly upset with him. Shouldn’t it be the other way around? A simple no to her mum, just this once. Didn’t she want to spend the night with him, after all? She seemed to have changed her mind about keeping away from him earlier. Being reduced to
sneaking around wasn’t a pleasant prospect.

“Right, then, goodnight, Jackie,” he called into the kitchen.

“Night, Doctor. Thanks for cookin’.”

He motioned furiously to Rose’s bedroom door with his head as he walked past her to the hall leading to the front door. He snatched his coat from off the rack on his way out, and shut the door unusually loudly to ensure Jackie would have heard.

He knew the location of her room from the inside; he only had to determine its position from outside the building and find a means to reach it. With luck, he found it was situated along the vertical fire escape route down the building. He galloped down the stairs and made for the towering black grating hanging along the structure, as it didn’t connect to the main stairwell, and made short work of the distance to the ladder, thankful he was rather tall this time around. On reaching the correct floor, he crouched out of sight from passersby, waiting for a signal from her that he was clear to climb through.

After two minutes, he sat against the metal fencing to take pressure off his feet. After ten, he was counting the holes in the grating beneath him. After thirty-six minutes had passed, the idea of actually walking back to the TARDIS grew in its appeal as the chill of night nipped at his hands and face. It would have been worse for Rose, had she accompanied him back to the TARDIS tonight as originally planned; he was better at maintaining body temperature. But uncomfortable, nonetheless, without running or other physical activity to generate some metabolic heat. Absently he played a game of catch with himself and the sonic, trying to maximize the number of flips he could make before he caught it again. Why hadn’t she tapped on the glass, opened the shades a crack, anything? Was Jackie in her room with her? Had she fallen asleep at the dining room table?

It was after forty-two minutes he heard the heavy scrape of the old window against the frame, striking against the silence of the empty alley. He was on his feet immediately at the sound, watching as the curtains were drawn to the side until the window thudded against the end of the frame.

“Doctor?” Rose whispered, invisible in the blackness of the room, the street lamps below not shining sufficient light through the window to illuminate her face. He stepped to the window and pushed his nose against the screen until he could just make out her silhouette, only a few inches from the other side.

“What took you so long?” he whispered back. “And why are all the lights off?”

“My mum thinks I’m asleep. She wouldn’t stop askin’ me questions. Now get in before I change my mind.” Her tone was cross despite the muted volume. He didn’t respond, aware that no concerns of hers could be addressed while he was still bereft of the ability to touch or even properly see her. With a quick wave of the sonic in a line through the middle of the screen, he hoped the fluttering sound wasn’t as noisy to humans as it was to him, his other hand catching the top half as it fell from the bottom immediately. Both pieces in hand, he climbed nimbly over the windowsill and swiftly replaced the broken halves, melding them back together just as easily before running his hand along the path of the repair to ensure no evidence of forced entry remained. He ran the sonic along the top and bottom of the window frame, fixing small dents and evening out the metal before closing it much more quietly than it had opened.

The light curtains swished closed as he whirled around, his eyes quickly adjusting to the lower level of light in the room. He identified the only sources as a faint bluish glow coming from an alarm clock on the nightstand, and a thin golden strip shining from under the door. The only sounds were the rustle of sheets on Rose’s bed and the whispers of newscasters down the hall. Jackie was still awake,
then. Suddenly he was treading on eggshells, instantly paranoid that she would burst into the room and expose his dishonesty.

Rose was easy to make out, sitting upright in her bed under the cover of a quilt, waiting. His desire to hold and comfort her quickly won out over his fear of her mother. He shrugged out of his coat, cringing a bit before rolling it up and placing it under her bed in case of an emergency, then unbuttoned his jacket and slipped off his shoes so they could join the coat. Loosening his tie, he released a couple buttons at his neck before sitting carefully on the sheets, minimizing the squeak of the springs. Rose flung the bunched-up quilt over him as he swung his legs up, and he turned on his side to lie facing her, propped up on his elbow.

“Doctor, what was that all about?” she asked quietly.

“What?” he asked, confused. “You’d rather I left on the shoes and the coat?”

“Not that,” she answered too loudly. She paused as they both stilled and listened to ensure no footsteps prodded towards the outside of her door, and when she continued it was in a careful whisper. “I mean how you could barely even look at me once we left the kitchen.”

“Course I could,” he retaliated, eyebrows pulling together as the meaning of her words escaped him as it often did. His first working interpretation was that somehow she thought he suddenly ceased to find her attractive.

“No. I mean,” she sighed heavily and let her arm fall from holding her up, her head sinking into her pillow until only one darkened eye looked back at him. “I think you overdid it with tryin’ not to let on about what’s happened with us.”

Right. Well, that might have been his third interpretation if he’d been given more time to think it over. He didn’t think he’d made it obvious he was aiming for a platonic environment, but again he was forgetting Rose’s gift for perception. He pinched the bridge of his nose, horrified to realize he must have been setting a record for how many times I can disappoint Rose in a day?

“You’re makin’ it weird. I don’t want this to be weird. If you’re uncomfortable with –”

“No,” he interrupted as firmly as possible with the volume restrictions in place. “That’s not it. It’s just… your mum. I already feel like she can’t stand the sight of me.”

“Well, she’s not your biggest fan, I’ll give you that. But she doesn’t hate you. Mostly I think she’s just jealous, ‘cause she wants me back here with her.”

“But if she found out about –”

“The kissing? Doctor, my mum already thinks we’re shaggin’. She has for a long time. Every time she gets me alone she has another chat with me. ‘S always ‘are you being safe, Rose?’” She ended with an impersonation of Jackie that was quite uncanny.

“Well, didn’t you tell her we haven’t?” he asked, unsure why he was so shocked and ill-at-ease at Rose’s disclosure.

“Doesn’t believe me. I mean, y’know what blokes are like. And we’re alone and together almost all the time. ‘S only natural she would assume that, I s’pose.”

“I think you’re forgetting the word human. I know what human blokes are like. I don’t share their utter lack of self-control.”
“Don’t you, though?” she raised her eyebrow at him. He ignored the implications behind her question.

“Just let me point out something. Us. In your bed. Now. Not shagging. Case in point.” Well, not if the universe went according to his plan. He attempted to ignore the impulsive urge to close the space between them, to throw caution to the wind and simply allow whatever happened to happen. But his pact to lead them there eventually was cemented in his mind already; and he knew his course of action could never be so impetuous. He had to keep it together.

“Point taken,” she mumbled, pulling the blanket up to her neck as her eyes drifted closed. “Well, next time, don’t. It didn’t feel nice.” Silence hung between them as the Doctor struggled with indecision. He still didn’t feel comfortable displaying affection in front of Jackie, or most humans he knew, to be honest. But learning he’d offended Rose was both a surprise and a blow to the chest. He was so not right for her. Why did she even put up with all his unreasonable and frustrating antics? Months ago, he might have believed she still only tolerated his unpleasant habits for the benefits of traveling, but he was painfully aware now of how much she cared for him, despite how it contradicted reason. He ached to give her everything she wanted, and needed, from him, every day for the rest of her life, but he doubted his ability. Eloquence was all but lost to him whenever she, however justifiably, questioned him about the nature of their relationship.

“I’m sorry,” he breathed. And it was a weak and unsatisfactory reply in all regards. He hadn’t even agreed not to do so in the future. He didn’t want to think about the future right now, not when he’d just brought all his recurring fears upon himself. As much to comfort himself as to console her, he slid closer until his arms could reach around her to pull her against him, her waist and chest meeting his own. His nose brushed through her hair, reveling in her scent, as hers nuzzled into the exposed skin at his collarbone where he’d loosened his tie.

“You’re forgiven,” she breathed. Rose. Only Rose would. He didn’t even forgive himself. Her lips pressed to the sensitive skin at his throat for a moment, creating a fresh wave of heat that his racing hearts propelled through his body. “Knew there was a reason I liked these open,” she murmured, lips ghosting across his skin as she spoke. He chuckled in response and couldn’t stop from smiling widely into the darkness. She lay quietly curled against him for a few minutes before breaking the silence with a question.

“What did you look like, before I met you?”

As soon as they’d stepped back in the TARDIS together the day of the Sycorax invasion, after certain rulers were overthrown and Christmas dinner shared, she’d bombarded him with an onslaught of questions about regeneration. He’d never had the chance to explain the ‘dodgy process’ prior to it or in the direct aftermath, so it made sense she was still confused, curious.

“How many times have you changed?” was her first inquiry, standing awkwardly too far away from him, still nervous about sharing close proximity with a body she’d only been familiar with for scarcely a day.

“Nine,” he had replied with no dampened vigor. “You met my ninth incarnation, this is my tenth.”

“Would you like detailed explanations, or are you just eager for another screening inside my head?”

“Maybe,” she mumbled, like he’d somehow shot her down with his question. In his mind he intended to execute it with a completely different inflection, like he was thrilled she wanted more, but somehow he supposed it’d come out wrong.

“Well, I dunno, are you sure? It won’t be a bit odd? I haven’t always turned out this young, mind.”
In fact, a handful of times he’d turned out looking old enough to be her grandfather, and it wasn’t like he’d gotten any younger since.

“Yeah, ‘m sure. I don’t care. Can you show me?”

“Hmm…” he hedged, playing up his only minor qualms to seem like he was torn with uncertainty. Truth be told, in a younger body, he felt young. Physically at least, he didn’t feel 903; that was just in his head. They wouldn’t be any less compatible if she knew he mightn’t always have been just the right brand of slim and foxy to suit her tastes. What mattered was who they both were at the present, or that’s what he quickly persuaded himself.

“Please?” she whispered, exactly the word he was waiting to hear. He could never be too certain that learning more and more distinctly alien facts about him was something she actively wanted, not just something she endured and might make her uncomfortable. A few snippets here and there certainly had when they’d first started traveling together, like the news about his age, or that he could harvest chemical information with his tongue, or that his internal body temperature was twenty degrees below that of a healthy human.

“But your skin feels – I dunno! It doesn’t feel colder than mine!” she’d yelled back at him in shock when he’d revealed one bit of Gallifreyan physiology trivia too many in the same day when she’d only joined him two weeks earlier.

“Yeah, I said ‘internal,’” he’d retorted, Northern accent thick as ever. “On the outside, I feel just like you. Rose, it’s not that strange. It’s like humans, just… the opposite. You’re thirty-seven inside, but most of your skin isn’t. Well, except for all the places you can stick a thermometer!” And he’d laughed at himself, unable to be perturbed by her surprise when he was still too excited to have her excellent company.

“Blimey, ‘s there anything else I ought to know? You got two stomachs or something?” she’d asked it sarcastically, but with his gob of course he’d answered.

“*Nope! Got two hearts though!”* And he’d beamed at her but she’d just gaped at him, unable to process anything further.

“Where’s the sudden curiosity coming from?” he asked, pulling himself back to the moment.

“I dunno, just… feel like it’s something I should know. God knows my mum’s shown you pictures of me when I was younger.”

“Well, not sure if that’s *quite* the same.”

“Oh, ‘s close enough,” she insisted. “I think the one from the toilet’s embarassin’ enough for eight lifetimes, anyway.” He fought back laughter even then as he recalled the photograph in question, one Jackie’d barely skimmed over as he sat on the couch next to her, all leather and stoicism as he tried to watch the news but was interrupted with family history every few seconds. Domesticity wasn’t quite so appealing to his predecessor, something he’d quickly realized had changed when he was born in his current flesh.

“Alright, c’mon, then,” he agreed, as the hand on her waist came to rest against her temple.

It was simple enough to give her a visual glimpse, but he felt it was necessary to include snippets of (what he believed to be) his most memorable events or one-liners or victories from each. There was gray hair and wide eyes; a rainbow scarf and wildly curly hair; a stick of celery attached to an otherwise normal blazer; his most eccentric Technicolor coat; the vest he’d been so fond of when he
was still not ginger for the 8th time. Mingled with those glimpses were sass and wit, adrenaline and adventure. As he thought back with her on all his many lives, he couldn’t help but be proud of them, his younger selves. They’d endured, survived, loved… made the most of everything life threw at them (which, he had to say, was quite a lot).

Still, he couldn’t completely let his guard down, actively steering his mind away from family, romantic escapades from centuries past that he knew better than to bring up, and any potential triggers of the Time War.

Once he’d concluded on his last happy memory in his eighth body, Rose shifted next to him, pressing herself more snugly against him.

“Hmm. Thanks,” she mumbled. “I like ‘em all. But I like this one the best,” she continued, poking a finger lightly into his chest a few times for emphasis, but the words were said in a half-stupor, like she’d been drugged. He couldn’t help but smile as he pulled her closer again, taking it as a good sign the faces and memories lulled her to sleep, as opposed to startling her or raising new questions in her mind that required immediate answers. One of his hands stroked softly through her hair as she settled against him, her forehead resting against his neck, breaths becoming slower and deeper.

“Night, Rose,” he whispered close to her ear, with no response.

He willed back the drowsiness that crept up on him, triggered by the darkness and the soft, warm, already-sleeping human nestled against him. He certainly didn’t need more sleep so soon after the several hours of peace the previous night, but it was simply lovely to fall asleep next to her, to wake to find her there and remind him she is not simply a recurring and brilliant dream. Sleeping together (in the innocent sense of the word) was so human. Her presence had over the last few nights staved off any nightmares that might otherwise visit him in his slumber, and now he couldn’t imagine trying to sleep any measure of time without her. Apprehension that their fabrications and hiding could be discovered at any moment, as the door clearly had no lock, kept him from nodding off. His hearing was on alert for any sounds approaching the room until the crack of light shining from beneath the door frame disappeared.

Hours of not-sleeping provided superfluous time for him to plan out how to go about possibly, maybe, bringing up more of his past to Rose, at some point. This activity produced more mental distress than actual resolution, but he at least decided on something for their next psychic session, as it were. By that time Rose had squirmed from his hold, likely too hot from being snuggled against him and under the thick covers, and turned on her back. He passed the remaining hours of the night content to watch over her, opening his arms to her every couple hours when she would wake and feel around blindly for him, unaware she had rolled away in sleep. And she always crawled her way back into his embrace, her head always came to rest against his chest. The third time it happened, in the early morning well before dawn, she sighed his name incoherently into his shirt as she slipped back into unconsciousness, and he realized with astonishment that he wasn’t bored. Lying in bed, doing nothing, there was nowhere he’d rather be.

As trickles of the sunrise began to creep around the shades and lighten the opposite wall, he carefully extricated himself from her grasp to collect his coats and shoes. He was unsure what time Jackie normally woke, and thought it better to estimate early. He left Rose an exclusive message on the psychic paper telling her to meet him outside as soon as she woke, and hoped it wouldn’t be within the 15 minutes it would take him to retrieve the TARDIS. He placed the paper on the pillow he vacated and left quietly through the window the same way he’d entered.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

A fairly quick update, as promised. I certainly enjoyed writing this one, so I hope you enjoy reading it!
Warning: description of minor injury, incl. blood.
P.S. I had a pretty shitty day today, so if you're thinking of dropping me a line to comment, I'd encourage you to do so! c:

She could sense that he’d gone, even before she opened her eyes. She fumbled around to her left with an arm slightly numb from sleeping on it for hours (as she’d wound up on her stomach again somehow) only to feel empty, cold sheets beneath her hand. “Doctor?” she whispered, on the slight chance that he may have gone to sit at her desk or simply stood up to stretch.

“Nope,” her mother’s voice rang from the vicinity of the door. Her eyes flew open as she flipped over and scrambled to sit, hastily scanning the room to count its occupants. To her relief she found it to be only her mum standing in the door frame. “Must have been dreamin’ you were still on the TARDIS, sweetheart. I knew you two were sleeping together. Dunno why you can’t just admit it.”

Rose’s hand came to her forehead with a heavy sigh. “Mum… no. It’s not… We’re not. I was just… confused for a tick.” In her lingering state of half-consciousness her argument was far from convincing, and she knew if the Doctor were still there he’d have melted into a puddle. She hoped Jackie never let on about the incident.

“Ok, fine,” she waved a hand to dismiss her lies. “Well, made you some tea, anyway. ‘S in the kitchen. And I can fix you some breakfast if you want. But I figured you’d want to be off again straightaway.”

“Ok, thanks, mum,” she mumbled, still trying to rub the sleep from her eyes.

“What’s that?” she asked, but Rose missed if she had gestured somewhere in the room, as her hands still covered her eyes.

“What?” she asked, blinking hard a few times to rid her vision of the blur. Her mum pointed to her right, to the empty side of the bed. Thankfully, Rose always slept to the left side of the bed, so it wasn’t suspicious to find her asleep skewed to one side. But her stomach dropped as she considered what evidence he might have left that her mum noticed now. What else could be on her bed that would warrant any attention? Reluctantly she turned, only to see the psychic paper on the pillowcase where the Doctor’s head rested through the night, or through most of it.

“Oh, that’s the Doctor’s,” she explained quickly. “He… let me borrow it yesterday and forgot to take it with him.” Perfectly reasonable, she thought.

“Well, why’s it on your pillow?” she asked, persistent as usual.

“I just… set it there, I dunno, mum. I was tired.”

“What is it?” It was too early for the third degree. And she was beginning to worry why he’d left it;
what message awaited her when she opened it. And she certainly didn’t want an audience with her mum when she did. Jackie didn’t need another reason to shy away from the Doctor for his distinctly alien quirks.

“‘S just a…” she cursed herself for not improvising more quickly. “Paper. It’s just this special paper he likes, I dunno, he’s weird about it.” She cringed internally.

“Alright,” she said finally, raising her hands as though in defeat. “Didn’t mean to pry, just curious. Well, come out when you want your cuppa, ‘s still hot.” As soon as her mom was out of sight, she snatched the psychic paper from the pillowcase.

*Rose –*

_Don’t worry – Jackie won’t be able to read this. I’ve gone back to the TARDIS. Meet me outside once you’re awake. Don’t forget to bring this with you!_

She was relieved there hadn’t been an intergalactic emergency of some kind, but wasn’t sure what time he’d left the message; it wasn’t as though these things were time-stamped. She guessed it couldn’t have been too long; but she recalled waking with him still there a few times in the dark, and even through the shades she could tell the sun now shone brightly from outside. She checked her alarm clock: 7:34. Perhaps it had been a few hours.

“Did you say you wanted me to make some eggs or – ” her mum’s voice echoed through the air once again, and Rose was caught off guard, not expecting her return. “See, what’s that you’re readin’? I knew it was something important! Did he write you a letter?” the words tumbled from her mouth. Rose hadn’t realized she was still staring at the faux handwriting on the page, reeling slightly at how far they’d come in such a short time.

“Uhm… no, I just…” she flipped the paper around for her to inspect, and prayed the Doctor had properly designed the message to be viewable by only her eyes. “Y’know, makin’ sure it didn’t get crinkled in the night.” A stupid, stupid reply, but her mum seemed to believe it nonetheless, and didn’t appear to have seen any writing on the page, as she only glanced at it for a moment before shrugging.

“Well, d’you fancy something to eat?” she asked.

“No thanks, ‘m not hungry. I’ll just stick with the cuppa then I’ve gotta head back. The Doctor wanted to leave early this morning.” She took a moment to stretch her cramped muscles before leaving the comfort of her bed and following her mum to the kitchen.

She downed her tea as fast as was possible without burning her tongue while also trying to listen to her mum gossip about the neighbors and nod along when necessary.

“Sure you won’t stay a bit longer?” her mum pleaded as she set the cup down.

“We’ll be back soon, mum, promise,” she replied as she gathered the few items she’d brought from the TARDIS: her mobile, shoes, and the psychic paper. “This visit wasn’t even planned, it was… sudden. Just knew you had a tough day and wanted to cheer you up a bit.”

“You’re right. Thanks for comin’, sweetheart.” They embraced and Rose headed for the door.
“Thanks for the cuppa. I’ll see you soon. Love you!” she called as she crossed the frame.

“Love you,” her mum called back.

The TARDIS waited for her in the alley around the corner, as promised.

The Doctor’s whims took them far from Earth, as she should have expected. They never seemed to wind up anywhere they planned to go in advance. She did hope they’d make it to Greece eventually, though.

And the Doctor kept their schedule quite busy over the next few days.

First it was the museum of time travel. Yep, the museum of time travel. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d gotten a migraine as bad as when the Doctor and several curators spent the majority of a day explaining the history and development of time travel when it was made out of order itself. The only highlight was the tribute to the Back to the Future series, a life-sized (and apparently, at one time or another, completely functional) model of Doc’s DeLorean.

Next it was hiking through and white-water rafting on a woodsy planet with forests that smelled like cinnamon. She couldn’t stop laughing at the sight of the Doctor in an orange life vest until a large dip in the river caused a wave of water to crash over her, and it was his turn to laugh. The blue-skinned passengers around them had looked on with curiosity mixed with disgust until the river did turn into a raging rapid and no one on the raft was doing much of anything but shouting and futilely splashing at the water for their lives with comparably tiny yellow oars. She tried to remember how the Doctor’d convinced her to even go along with it, but her memory failed amidst the frequent splashes and drops of the surging water. And as they trudged back through the forest at twilight sopping wet, it was the Doctor’s turn to laugh again when she’d flopped to the dirt motionlessly at the sight of a remarkably bear-like creature as he explained they were ‘harmless as domesticated dogs.’

After the former, she’d been too mentally exhausted for talking about anything, and after the latter, too physically exhausted to even bother to shower before collapsing onto her bed next to the Doctor. He’d been there through both nights, sure, but was gone before she woke, and on the third day she knew he was avoiding talking about something.

“Morning!” he called once she’d showered off the cinnamon pollen and mucky water of the previous day and walked into the console to find him fidgeting with something under a panel restlessly. Leaping out and flipping it closed again, he rushed to take command of the controls.

“You’ll never guess where we’re going today!” he exclaimed.

“Could I ever really guess where we’re going?” she snarked, but he didn’t seem to hear her, already rattling off details about the next planet, and though she couldn’t help but be excited, she wasn’t sure she could handle another jam-packed day with no time for real conversation. She hoped it would be at least somewhat quieter and more relaxing than the days before.

“It’s sort of like Earth. Well, it’s a lot like Earth. It was even born around the same time, but in a completely different galaxy with a different star and conditions… amazing!” he raved on and on about the planet called Ryzoctan as he prepared them for launch. She had to laugh at least a little at his bubbly mood this morning.

She had a feeling they’d traveled in time more than in space as they stepped out the doors.

“Well, we might be a little earlier than I intended,” the Doctor explained as he looked about. But he fell silent as she did as they took in the geography of their surroundings.
The ground beneath her feet was dry, cracked stone blown over with dust; a few feet ahead the stones turned to wet rocks as they disappeared into a rippling river or lake, she couldn’t tell which; giant, oddly shaped rocks loomed over the body of water and blocked most of the view. The harsh browns and grays of the dead rocks were illuminated by the light that shone through openings in the towering stone structures. Pink and orange radiated through the scenery from a yellow-ish orange sun strikingly like the Earth’s and brought life to the land, which seemed devoid of the green of plants or the commotion of animals.

“Does anything live here?” she asked quietly, reluctant to break the tranquility.

“Hold on,” he held up a finger, listening for a minute.

“Look,” he pointed to their left just as a large, brown creature flew from between a few rocks, high in the sky. It was like a stingray, a long tail and a flat body with wings that hardly extended from it; and it was like a pterodactyl, twenty times the size of a stingray and cawing with a high screech like something she’d heard in Jurassic Park. Another emerged from between a different set of rocks, and a third. Within a minute the sky was filled with the fascinating creatures, and they coursed so majestically through the air she was reminded of the stingray again: their movements resembled swimming through the air more than flying through it.

“Are those… dinosaurs?” she asked, amazed.

“Well, not exactly. They aren’t called dinosaurs on this planet. But they are similar to the prehistoric Earth birds.

They were both mesmerized by the gliding giants for a few minutes before the Doctor surprised her.

“How long are you gonna stay with me?” he turned to her. What was this? A test? Was this what he’d been avoiding the last two days? Did he want to reassure himself? She decided to go for the most encouraging answer she could think of.

“Forever.”

He smiled, and she thought maybe, just maybe, he was starting to understand.

“C’mon,” he beamed, taking her hand. “Let’s go take a look ‘round.”

“Doctor, are you mental?” she said, tugging back on his hand. “’S too dangerous! What if there are T-rexes on this planet, too?”

“Don’t worry, I’ve got this!” he dug the sonic out of his pocket and held it up. “It’s got a special T-rex-repelling setting. We’re covered.” He continued to pull stubbornly on her arm until she gave in and followed him along a crusty path that led through a couple of precarious boulders close to the water.

“I don’t get it,” she asked as they balanced and leaped across stones as their trail dipped into the river. “We haven’t seen any plants. What do those things eat? And how are we breathin’ oxygen?”

“We’re breathing, though, aren’t we? We’re bound to stumble on some plants at some point. We’re just on a rocky patch at the moment.” He helped her across one particularly long gap between rocks and they regained footing on the path.

She nearly knocked the Doctor off his feet when she leapt into him at the sight of two mangy, large-toothed squirrels scuttling along the path in front of them.
“Blimey, Rose, they were six inches tall!” he complained as he steadied them both on their feet. “Are you alright?” he asked with a hand on her shoulder.

“Yeah, sorry, ‘m just a little… anxious, I guess.”

“Don’t worry. We’re gonna be fine. I won’t let anything eat you, I promise.” She couldn’t argue with him when he reassured her with those ridiculous puppy eyes.

“Well, you better not,” she teased as they continued down the trail.

“Y’know, I did once meet a T-rex, on Earth. To be honest, Jurassic Park and Godzilla get it wrong. They’re so big that they don’t even see you as a viable food source, and certainly not as a threat. It just walked right by us in search of something better.”

“Who’s ‘us’?”

“I was with a couple friends, and an old companion of mine. It was way back, in my fourth regeneration.”

“Was that the one with the…” she motioned little twirling motions around her head.

“Curly hair, yeah,” he laughed. She at least had an idea what that scene must have been like, now that she could associate a face and a personality to the former Doctor.

“Can you tell me more about your other – ” she gasped as the Doctor grabbed her by the waist and yanked her away from the cliff edge that they’d nearly walked off as they rounded a sharp corner of the path.

“Wo-o-ah!” he exclaimed as he held her close to him and stepped cautiously towards the edge, peering down and to either side of the rock face. To their right the cliff side curved inward, and a waterfall cascaded to the ground, she guessed the same origin as the river they’d crossed through a few minutes earlier. On the ground, the river continued to flow, its pace accelerated tenfold, and surrounding the clear water were fields and fields of blue grass and flowers in varying hues of pink and purple. Lofty, turquoise-colored trees scattered across the scene, and each had its share of elephant-sized creatures munching away at its leaves. Most of the plain was still shaded, as the sun hadn’t yet finished its ascent into the sky, but it was bristling with life nonetheless, and she could only look on in awe until The Doctor’s voice interrupted her trance.

“See? Told you we’d find plants. Ah, I love the blue grass. Brilliant!” He stepped to their right, where a small outcropping of the trail created a perfect ledge to lean against the rocks, and sat down against it. He patted the hard ground next to him as he looked up at her brightly.

“So, who were you with, before?” she asked as she slid down the rough face of rock behind them. He sighed like he didn’t want to answer, staring out at the colors and life forms below, brow knit together in the visage of contemplation she knew too well for a long moment

“Want me to show you?” he asked finally, turning his attention back to her, and her interest was immediately piqued for anything psychic.

“Okay,” she agreed, a warm smile spreading across her lips. He scooted closer to her and took her face in his hands, and she closed her eyes the same time she saw him close his.

Suddenly she was watching a curly-haired, rainbow-scarfed Time Lord sprint through the dirt alongside two younger blokes, holding the hand of a beautiful woman she knew looked familiar but couldn’t place, a familiar, giant, greenish dinosaur hot on their heels.
“Alright, perhaps this was a bad idea,” huffed the Doctor as they ran.

“Perhaps!?” the woman shouted back. And she realized her identity; she was so much younger than when they’d met. After only a few more seconds of the running the dinosaur had caught up with them, but it’s thundering legs skirted around them as they ducked for cover, and its body passed over them in an instant. The four huddled against each other in the dirt, watching the monster chase after a weak-looking tree-muncher about a quarter of its size just as it began to dart away, kicking up dirt when realized it was being hunted.

“Well, would you look at that!” the Doctor shouted with glee, prompting a stressed, exaggerated eye roll from all three of his partners.

Her current Doctor cut off the video.

“Was that… Sarah Jane?” asked Rose.

“Yeah,” he answered, straightforward. “You knew I traveled with her.”

“Yeah, I know,” she acknowledged, trying not to feel jealousy over the clip. There was no call for it whatsoever.

“Were you two… together?” Her mouth completely disregarded her brain. The Doctor cleared his throat nervously.

“How do you mean?”

“Like you and I are together.” Blimey, she really needed to just shut up about it. He sighed.

“Does it matter?” he asked, slightly irritated.

“No, I guess not.” She turned to look back at the strangely colored terrain and the oversized herbivores. It didn’t matter, really, because he’d moved on, and so had she. Right now his only companion was sitting next to him, and she should really start focusing more on that. It was just, she felt like she didn’t know him. Or like she didn’t know eighty percent of him. She only wanted to learn more about his other lives, for him to be honest with her and not feel he has to hold back the truth, regardless of the subject.

“No, we weren’t,” the Doctor admitted suddenly. She turned to him again. “Though we almost were, a handful of times. But, Rose, I’m over nine hundred years old. I’ve had – I mean – there’ve been others. Mind you, the number’s pretty small, considering. But still. Most of them were other Time Lords. A couple of times… with humans.” It made complete, perfect sense. It was understandable. It was believable given his age. And she was elated that he was being honest. But at the same time, she couldn’t bite back the jealousy at the information.

To be fair, it was always a sensitive topic for her, discussing exes with her previous boyfriends, so this shouldn’t be all that different. And yet, it was different, because the Doctor was different. She filed away the pettiness for later.

“Yeah, ‘course,” she nodded, much too delayed a reaction, with as convincing a smile as she could manage. “So, what about the others? Other people who traveled with you, I mean.”

“What about them?”

“Tell me about ‘em.”
“Come here,” he beckoned her, though their bodies were squished together against the rock as it was. She leaned her head towards him, testing him with her eyes to try to extricate exactly what it was he wanted. Careful not to knock her skull, he rested his forehead against hers and closed his eyes again, at the same time he reached for her hand and squeezed it lightly. He breathed in and out deeply and she watched as an orange zebra appeared behind her eyes.

“You traveled with an orange zebra?” she asked, dumbfounded. The Doctor laughed hard enough that he had to break away to avoid jostling her, and the image died away.

“No, I’m sorry, it was just, I’m trying something out,” he explained between diminishing chuckles. “Just bear with me a moment.” He steadied his breathing and returned his head to hers, and the zebra appeared again.

For about ten seconds the Doctor didn’t move, and she wasn’t even sure he was breathing. As he slowly pulled his forehead away, the eccentric tiger-colored zebra didn’t disappear.

“You can still see it?” he asked.

“Yeah,” she smiled. “So, one hand is all it takes?” she asked, squeezing the one she was holding.

“Well, once I’ve had practice on the same person a few times, it gets easier for me to do. It requires less direct contact. I just haven’t done it for a while so I wasn’t sure it was going to work. We haven’t had much practice, after all.”

A brown-haired pair a few years younger than she was took the place of the tiger-ish zebra, wearing clothes more appropriate for the 1960’s.

“You see them?” asked the Doctor.

“Yeah.”

“That’s Barbara and Ian. I basically kidnapped them when I stole the TARDIS. They were my first, sort of forced companions.”

“Kidnapped?”

“Well, with no ill will, of course. They had, uhm… found out about us. I just wanted to make sure they kept things under wraps, I suppose. Anyway, after them, there was Vicki…”

The Doctor went on providing a brief explanation of the various characters that became guests aboard the TARDIS, accompanied with whatever short memory clips he found appropriate for showcasing their personalities. He was succinct, and though he had probably two dozen names and faces, he blazed through them all in less than half an hour. It was probably to avoid boring or overwhelming her, though she wasn’t sure if she would be more or less overwhelmed if he took a bit more time to delve into these mysterious historical strangers. She appreciated the effort, nonetheless.

A few things stood out to her after only about six people. First, most of them were female, and roughly her age. This fact certainly would have made her question her importance to him several months ago, but now it was something she practically expected. He was like a magnet for young, attractive women everywhere they went, it seemed. She couldn’t go to the loo for two minutes without some random woman making a pass at him, if their experience at the pier was anything to go by.

Second, he neglected to mention how or why he parted ways with any of them, merely glossing over their departures and skipping to the next person like they were phases, rather than actual people with
beating hearts and thoughts and emotions. This fact was breaking her heart more and more with each new name, because she knew that none of the goodbyes could have been easy, for either party. She started to fear that some of the separations were against their will, that perhaps some of these travelers were lost in a fashion similar to the one the Doctor feared they would one day be faced with – unavoidable external forces.

“And, let’s see, after Grace, oh, you’re gonna love this story,” the Doctor continued despite her inner turmoil. “I met this woman, on Earth. She was wonderful. Beautiful, smart, funny, made the TARDIS a better place from the minute she stepped inside.”

“Oi, Doctor, I am still listenin’!” she berated him, a bit repulsed that he would admire some past woman she’d replaced for her own ears to hear.

“And,” the Doctor went on without acknowledging his offense. “I met her in the basement of a shop.”

She was back in that dank basement, shop window dummies closing in on her exposed hiding spot as she cowered against a stack of boxes, fearing the worst outcome possible. A strong hand attached to black leather reached out for her arm as he said the word she’d never forget: run. This grumpy, enigmatic stranger tugged her along with him, and they were running from danger in a way she’d only had to in nightmares before that fateful day, the one that she’d always remember as the one that changed her life forever. The scene faded the same way it came.

She opened her eyes to a brighter sun, lighting up the grass to a wonderful shade of light blue, the stomping not-dinosaurs still picking off trees and wandering across hills and dipping their heads into the water. She squinted as her eyes adjusted, but she didn’t have to for more than a second. The Doctor’s hand disengaged from hers only to wrap around her shoulder, while the other scooped up her legs from beneath her knees so he could properly turn her towards him, she slung her legs over his to lessen the awkwardness of the new position.

“So, what did you think?” he asked, his voice a low, smooth menace that toyed dangerously with her barely contained restraint. His forehead nearly touched hers again and she took a moment to blink through her shock before responding. She decided to embrace his sudden interest in renewed closeness, reaching a hand up to stroke his hair, and it only made him lean in closer with a soft sigh.

“Well, the ending was nice,” she whispered back after a moment.

“I thought you might like it,” he barely mumbled against her mouth before his lips were on hers, slow and gentle, and as one of his hands buried in her hair, already his touch was clouding her brain. Damn, he was good at charming his way out of talking.

“Doctor,” she breathed, pushing him with a firm hand to his chest.

“What is it?” he asked through a furrowed brow.

“Your friends, it was nice to meet them all, really, it was. I’ve probably forgotten half their faces already and more than half their names, but… What happened to ‘em? Why did they all leave? Why did any of ‘em leave?” His hand left her leg with a sharp sigh, and came to his ear instead, nervously tugging on it as he pondered his response.

“Different reasons,” he replied vaguely.

“Like?”

“I don’t know, usually they just had other things to do. Lives to get back to.”
“Why else?” she nudged him.

“Some of them just… didn’t work out, I suppose. So in a way I asked them to leave. Sometimes circumstances just tore us apart. Like with Sarah Jane, I got called home and she wasn’t allowed. And sometimes – ” he cut himself off. She gulped, fearing he would say what she didn’t want him to. He rubbed aggressively over his eyes with his thumb and index finger before pinching the bridge of his nose, willing back whatever thoughts were catching up with him now.

“A few of them died,” he whispered, his voice breaking on the last word. She reached out a hand to caress his cheek, unable to speak anything that might console him when she couldn’t even console herself. He closed his eyes, unable to meet hers after the confession. “That blood is on my hands, of course,” he added with a dreary self-loathing she couldn’t stand to hear from his mouth.

“Doctor, stop it,” she said, holding his cheek more firmly. When he only cringed rather than take her hint and open his eyes, she spoke again.

“Doctor, look at me.” He obeyed this time. “’S not your fault. None of ‘em. The life you have, this job you do, or whatever it is, ’s dangerous. And the people who travel with you know that. I know that. There’s always a risk, it’s just part of the travelin’, ’s not you that’s the danger. It’s what you’re up against. But I’m sorry,” she finished earnestly, stroking his cheek with her thumb. “I’m sorry about your friends.”

“Well that’s not your fault. But thanks, Rose,” he smiled ever so lightly. This was one of those things. One of those things she wanted to take from him so he’d never feel guilt or sorrow over it again, but she knew life didn’t work like that. And that the Doctor always blamed himself when anything bad happened, and nothing she could say was likely to change that. What she could do, though, was show him that she was there, and always would be, as she’d already told him as much. Bringing her lips to his was easy, since she still held his face in her hand.

He returned her kiss with more passion than before: his lips a little less gentle, his tongue a little more daring, his hands a little more forceful as they attempted to tug her closer without success. The way they were sitting just wasn’t conducive to what he was trying to do. She went ahead and let him try anyway, enjoying the way his hands slid along her back with each attempt. It was only after he growled in frustration that she gave in.

Her arms wrapped around his neck as she clambered over his outstretched legs, straddling him with a fluid movement. She kept her weight on her knees where they still rested on the ground, a few inches between them in an attempt to avoid unnecessary teasing, but it didn’t matter. The angle was perfect for him and his arms circled around her back to crush her against him, erasing the space between them, and as they both hummed with satisfaction at their much preferable position she wondered why she didn’t lead with it. His hands trailed down her back, over her hips until his fingers latched onto the belt loops of her trousers, pulling her hips even more snugly against his. Her breath caught and he whispered her name against her lips and her fingers climbed higher to tangle in his hair as her self-control slipped.

A warm breath blew over her face, and the Doctor’s, with a snuffing sound like a horse. Their lips both became still at the intrusion; the Doctor was the first to disengage them and turn to investigate, but Rose followed him after only a second. A roughly horse-sized, very velociraptor-looking thing stood staring at them from a foot away, with the yellow eyes and Sauron-shaped corneas that she had come to dread after consecutive dinosaur films. Its reptile-like skin was a dark orange color, its tail covered with small spikes, yellow spots covered its back, and on its head were unique, whisker-like projections. So much for the peaceful outing she’d wanted.

“Ok, uhm… hello,” the Doctor addressed it, eyes wide with something that actually resembled fear.
Its mouth was closed, and Rose was thankful she couldn’t see the teeth she knew waited behind it, but its nostrils flared as it gathered up the scent of the strange intruders on its planet.

“You’re beautiful,” he whispered, though at the same time he snaked his hand between them to reach into his coat for the sonic. “Any chance you can understand me?” he asked it at normal volume once the sonic was securely in his grasp. Apparently, it couldn’t.

The orange not-dinosaur let out a shriek as it backed a few steps away, stumbling over a crack in the earth as it did, the sound splitting her eardrums and the movement revealing layers of shark-like teeth, as she feared. It didn’t move to attack, but stood analyzing them still, cocking its head to the side as they fidgeted with helplessness, breathing loudly and she couldn’t stop comparing the sound to a horse.

“Oh, we’re gonna have to move,” the Doctor whispered close to her ear. “Just slowly stand, no sudden movements, no talking…” Slowly she rose from her knees to her feet, keeping her eyes on the creature. It flinched as each knee made a scraping sound against the dirt, but otherwise didn’t move. Once she was standing she reached a hand to the Doctor and he rose cautiously and silently next to her, still gripping her hand tightly.

“Oh, let’s just, try to walk, maybe it’ll let us leave,” he whispered again. Unfortunately from their spot they had to move closer to it before they could escape. He flicked the settings on the screwdriver a few times and aimed it at the creature, and lifted a foot from the ground before hesitantly returning it to the ground closer to it, before doing the same with his other foot. The creature didn’t move. Rose took the same step when the Doctor tugged on their linked hands, but for some reason this aggravated it more than the Doctor’s movement. It screeched again, threatening them by extending its neck to bare its teeth to them both. The Doctor cringed.

“I’m really sorry about this,” he told it before activating the sonic, which became the source of a high-pitched frequency reminiscent of a dog whistle. The creature was obviously tortured by the sound, trying helplessly to cover its head with hands that were too small to reach, crying out with a sound more like pain than fear or anger, different from the sounds it called to them moments before. The Doctor let the sonic run for a few seconds before turning it off, and the creature remained in a dazed state, its legs trembling as it shook its head.

“I’ve only stunned it, run!” he shouted as he yanked her by the hand and they took off back down the trail they came. Rose had to watch each step as they pounded across uneven earth so she wouldn’t catch her shoe on the cracked ground or a random bit of rock. The Doctor regularly whipped his head around to check behind them for signs they were pursued.

“This is why… no snogging… In the TARDIS only! IN THE TARDIS ONLY!” the Doctor gasped between breaths as they sprinted towards the river they crossed.

He skidded to a halt at the water and motioned for Rose to cross first, but as Rose’s foot stepped onto the first wet rock and she glanced back, she saw it before the Doctor could warn her. An orange blur running down the trail towards the water, its legs carrying it like a roadrunner in a cartoon, blindingly fast.

“It’s gaining on us. Quick!” the Doctor called.

Rose tried to quicken the pace that she clambered across the slippery stones, but her shaking legs and clumsy feet took her down, her sole slipping on a smooth surface as she took a bigger step than she was capable. She crashed into the shallow water, knees to hands, the water splashing her face though she avoided her head being completely submerged.
“Rose!” the Doctor yelled. “Are you alright?”

She stood shakily as quickly as she could and called back to the Doctor where he stood repelling the orange thing with the screwdriver again, eliciting another ear-piercing shriek and pounds of its feet to the ground.

“M fine!” She’d rolled her ankle slipping from the rock, her knees and wrists were throbbing from the impact, and her hand was in fact bleeding where she’d felt a sharp rock at the bottom of the water puncture her palm. She limped through the almost knee-deep water to the other edge, giving up avoiding the water further, as she watched the Doctor leap nimbly over the rocks behind her. He caught up with her in seconds, leaving the creature stunned again at the opposite shore, and took her injured hand in his too roughly, causing her to cry out against her will.

“What is it?” he asked as she winced and pulled her hand free. But he looked at his hand, then, red with her blood, and understood, growling in frustration.

“Rose, you’re not fine!” he scolded her, but he came around her other side and took the intact hand anyway. “C’mon!”

The Doctor had to slow their pace as she stumbled through their first few steps, her ankle and knees aching and wobbling beneath her. They managed to struggle along the ground for a several dozen meters before the Doctor looked back and found their pursuer hot on their trail again.

“It’s moving!”

She picked up her pace to a quick jog, terror and adrenaline numbing the pain as she went. The TARDIS was in sight in a few seconds, and they both broke into a full sprint towards it, the Doctor’s other hand aimed behind him with the screwdriver ready to fire off the noise again. Her cramping muscles burned, her knees had lost all sensation, the foot attached to her rolled ankle flailed unnaturally like it had detached as she forced one foot in front of the other again and again... But then they both crashed through the TARDIS door, tumbling over each other to the floor as it slammed behind them. The sound of a head thumping against the door and one more angry shriek was the last they heard from the strange alien dinosaur.

As they both lay panting on the floor, the pain in her hand and ankle returned with a vengeance, her palm catching fire while her ankle felt swollen as an elephant’s in a matter of seconds.

“Doctor… I need…” she managed to gasp out.

“Sorry, c’mon, let’s get you fixed up,” the Doctor responded immediately. He leaped up from the floor and lifted her into his arms, water still dripping from her clothes as he carried her from the console.

He sat her down on one of the exam tables and she scooted herself back carefully so her legs weren’t dangling, taking pressure off her ankle.

“Ok, which one hurts more, the hand or the ankle?” he asked her seriously, his eyebrows pulling together with concern.

“The hand,” she lifted it weakly. The stinging inflammation was slowly overtaking the throbbing in her ankle. The Doctor nodded professionally, tossed his coat across the room, slipped on his glasses, and retrieved a bottle from a cabinet she couldn’t read and a bag that read ‘sterile cotton pads.’ He set the items on the counter next to her improvised cot and snapped a latex glove onto one hand.

Collapsing onto a rolling stool exactly like the ones in Earth doctors’ offices, he wheeled over to her
and gently took her injured hand in his gloved one.

“I still can’t believe you have a chair like that,” she teased, an attempt to will away the pain and anxiety of what he might have to do to remedy her hand.

“What? Why? I am a proper doctor, Rose, I have a medical license,” he replied as he examined her hand closely. He pulled the sonic from his coat with the non-gloved hand and flipped the settings a few times before whirring it over the injury for a few seconds.

“The laceration is only a few millimeters deep, but it did puncture a main artery of the hand, that’s why it was heavily bleeding… about four centimeters across… no sign of trauma to any of the metacarpal bones… This will heal up just fine,” he assessed. “Normally, this would require stitches, but, I may be able to close it up with the sonic. I’ll do my best.” He stood and removed the glove from his hand. “How bad is the pain right now?”

“Uhm…” she cringed a little.

“Out of ten?”

“I dunno… five, six?”

“Ok.” He reached into another cabinet for a second bottle and put it with the first. He put on a pair of gloves this time, before returning to his Doctor’s chair.

“Before I can do anything, I have to clean this up. I have no idea what sort of microorganisms were in that water, so I’ll have to use the best stuff I’ve got.” He looked at her strangely, guilt and apology radiating from his eyes.

“Ok, great, that’s fine. What’s the problem?”

“It’s gonna burn,” he admitted.

“How much?”

“A lot.” She sighed heavily.

“Lovely.”

“I’ve got local anesthetic I can put on it, but it will interfere with the antiseptic if I combine them. I’ll have to wait at least thirty seconds.” She groaned at the unfairness of life.

“Well, the alternative is, I can get an I.V. going with generalized pain medication before I start. Mind you, you’d probably pass out on me in a couple minutes, but it wouldn’t hurt. I’d take care of you while you were unconscious.” The prospect of a needle freaked her out even more.

“No, it’s ok. I can handle it. I think.” She took a deep breath while he poured whatever death sauce he was talking about onto a fresh cotton disc.

“I’d say you can hold my hand, but they’re both gonna be busy.”

“S fine, just do it,” she insisted, wanting to get it over with as soon as possible.

“Here, take my hair,” he rolled his chair even closer and tilted his head towards her. “Pull on it all you like, it’s quite resilient.”

“Doctor, I don’t need to – ”
“Just do it, it’ll help! C’mon,” he insisted. She conceded and her fingers glided through his hair until her hand rested on top of his head. Satisfied, he held her palm in his larger hand, managing to both steady her wrist and secure her fingers from closing over her palm. Without warning soaking cold cotton was brushing over her skin, igniting the wound like pouring hot sauce over a series of papercuts. She fought back the cry that begged to escape her throat, digging her heels into the table and clutching a large fistful of the Doctor’s hair despite thinking she’d never need it. It was a string of ‘sorry’ and ‘thirty seconds’ the Doctor was repeating as he held the hand that twitched with longing to escape in place, using the pad to clean off excess blood from her palm and fingers after he’d covered over the ‘four-centimeter’ gash.

Thirty seconds was agonizingly long, but she made it; the drenched burning stuff finally left her skin and the Doctor snatched the second bottle from the table. With none of the meticulousness as before, he doused her entire palm with another cooling liquid, and as it started to flow from her hand onto the floor (which clearly the Doctor cared nothing about in that moment), the pain was eliminated in little more than a second. She sighed out her relief and loosened her grip on his now wildly fluffed up hair.

“Alright?” he asked, searching her eyes for confirmation.

“Yeah, better. That’s much better.” He set down the bottle and picked up a fresh cotton disc, patting off the excess liquid from her hand without coming into contact with the wound.

“I’m sorry. I know it’s horrible.”

“Have you had to use it before?”

“Oh, yes. On my foot. In my sixth regeneration I once got stabbed in the foot by – ”

“Okay, no!” Rose cut him off, unable to hear a gruesome story when she was still reeling from the sight of her own slice and the pain that accompanied it.

“Sorry. Once I close this up it shouldn’t hurt like that again.” Once the anesthetic had dried he degloved one hand again to snatch the sonic from the table. He worked over the laceration for several minutes, and with the anesthetic doing its job she felt no sensation from it whatsoever.

“That feels good,” said the Doctor suddenly. She realized her fingers had been massaging through his hair for she didn’t know how long; she was marveling at the Doctor’s meticulous skill with a non-medical instrument, the way his eyebrows pulled together and eyes narrowed in concentration, the strange thrill of pleasure she got out of experiencing his medical prowess first-hand. She’d already forgotten that minutes ago she was in blistering pain.

“Well, that feels like nothing,” she commented back, avoiding saying the path of her thoughts aloud to distract him from what he was doing.

“That’s the idea.”

After another minute or so the whirring of the sonic finally ceased, and the Doctor held up her hand so she could examine it more closely.

“Success!” he exclaimed. A dark pink scar ran across her palm, edged with purples and blues of bruising, but there were no traces of open wound or blood to be found.

“I’m going to wrap it up just to be on the safe side,” he added as he reached into a drawer to get a roll of gauze. “But it should feel good as new in a couple days.”
The Doctor wound the soft stuff around her hand a few times, gentle but with enough pressure to ensure it wouldn’t fall off during normal activities. Lastly, he put a layer of medical tape around the gauze wrap to secure it in place, and freed her hand for good, at last. He slipped the remaining glove from his hand and washed his hands up at the sink before returning to stand next to her.

“You ok?” he asked, taking her face in both hands so she couldn’t lie if she wanted to.

“Yeah. Thanks for fixin’ up my hand,” she smiled.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered, then pressed a chaste kiss to her lips.

“’S not your fault,” she whispered back, before pulling him in with her unwrapped hand for a deeper kiss. As the throbbing in her hand had disappeared, the hormones rushing through her system had no pain to tackle, and as she’d watched the Doctor at work a mad craving for him flared up instead, desire taking the place of distress all too quickly. In fact, she realized as she tugged forcefully on his coat just how desperate she was. Desperate to lie back on the table as the Doctor climbed onto it, watch as he slowly removed her layers of clothes, and his hands would grip at her waist as his lips explored every inch of her skin, until she would beg him to be inside her and he would just shag her right on the exam table.

The Doctor did no such thing, of course. Feeling his coat close to ripping from her yanking to crudely persuade him, he pulled away with a chuckle.

“Rose, as a doctor, I have to recommend you take it easy for a few days. I’m afraid that means no shagging on exam tables.” She quailed. Had he just read her mind? What, like if she hadn’t just been injured, he would take her there and then, when at all previous points he hadn’t been prepared? She didn’t know for sure, but she could kick herself for not just wading through the river in the first place and not trying to run over slippery rocks. God, she needed him badly.

“Rain check?” she asked, still breathing heavily and scrambling to recover her wits.

“Maybe,” he hedged, raising one eyebrow. “But as for right now? I haven’t even looked at your ankle yet.” She groaned.

“Come on, then, let’s see,” he wandered to the edge of the table and was gently taking off her soaking shoes and socks before she could protest.
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Okay, something you guys should know going into this chapter: I cried writing it. Really I was a wreck the entire Saturday afternoon I spent immersed in it. It's a bit of a turning point for our little lovebirds and it's very important to me, and I hope you'll see why. I'd definitely love feedback on this chapter as it's going to take them places I always dreamed they would reach in canon (and perhaps they did, but we may never know that for sure). Laced with the feels, of course, is more tugging on the already taut wire of their palpable tension, but I promise I won't be torturing you guys much longer. I really do hope you'll enjoy this chapter and again, the best I can hope for is for you to drop me a line and tell me what you think. <3
Note: 50th essentially disregarded, for obvious reasons.

Rose’s ankle was only moderately sprained. After speeding up the healing process with the sonic, a quality, lightweight brace, and about a week of keeping off it, he expected she’d be nursed back to health and ready for the next excursion. The difficult part of being locked in the TARDIS again was finding activities to do that kept them more than an arm’s length apart; Rose had taken his hedgy ‘maybe’ response to the potential future shagging too seriously. They ended up watching the entire *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (extended editions), playing three convoluted Gallifreyan board games he forced on them, and spending more hours in the library than usual, (on separate couches, to Rose’s dismay). Plus, he prepared complicated, time-intensive but nutritious dishes for every meal to distract his hands.

Once she’d finished and ranted over *The Deathly Hallows* and respectfully declined another saga adventure into the *Star Wars* franchise, he finally started to offer details about people from home on day three. Rose had disguised it as a typical, back-and-forth sharing of stories that was *so human*, of course, but he decided to humor her anyway, and soon realized it wasn’t nearly as bad as he’d been dreading it to be. Excerpts about his parents and his friends growing up didn’t make him collapse inside; he even briefly introduced Rassilon and his extremist antics, the Master and their rocky friendship. A few things he had to show her: what he looked like in traditional Time Lord attire, the colors and layout of the TARDIS interior the day he stole it. And he was okay, *really* ok, sprawled across the floor of the library, Rose on her stomach across from him as she listened intently, or watched intently when need be, lighting up the room and his dim memories like no one else could. She was making him better all the time, and he thought maybe the rain check wouldn’t be too far in the future after all.

Alternating his tales and psychic excerpts were stories of Rose’s. Traumatizing ex-boyfriends (that he anticipated he’d dream of hunting down to stop their hearts with a flick of the screwdriver for the rest of his lives). The first primary school teacher that made her cry, and only because she’d used a curse word in front of her entire fourth-year class (well, if he were a primary school teacher, he wouldn’t have tolerated it, either). Every type of biscuit she used to bake with her mum at Christmas until she graduated high school. He’d already asked her all the basics, long before he regenerated. He wanted the deep cuts, the minutiae, and he consumed every story eagerly; they all made Rose exactly the woman she was when she decided to come along with him, and made him the luckiest man in the universe.
The Doctor was at Rose’s side each night as she fell asleep, even indulged her wishes to climb under the covers with her (and she never let him forget to leave a few buttons of his shirt undone). Some nights, she was content to lie next to him as she dozed, others she would burrow into his side, an arm draped across him, her head resting on his chest or nestling into his neck as she faded into unconsciousness. Some nights, his eyes would close as he held her, lulled to sleep by her warmth and soft breathing, peace flooding his mind that they weren’t adventuring, that no danger could creep up on them in the TARDIS. Nothing could take her from him, at least not until her ankle had healed. He savored the moments she was in deep sleep, when he could comb a hand through her hair, trace his fingertips along her silky skin, snuggle up behind her when she rolled over to draw her against him and press his lips to her neck. He didn’t know how he could ever let her go, even then, before he’d truly surrendered everything.

It was difficult, of course, keeping his baser desires in check. But since Rose was mostly unconscious, the inherent chivalry embedded in his mind prevented them from becoming too much of an issue. That is, until the fifth night.

He hadn’t slept all that much the four nights before, his head swimming with disinterred memories and basking in Rose’s scent and the delectable pheromones she’d never know she was offering to him. She’d faded maybe thirty minutes past; she’d been fighting fatigue and heavy lids for nearly an hour as he started to run out of bits of himself to tell her about that he was ready for. He hadn’t mentioned spouses or children or the war. He supposed he could, that he might be ready to show her some of it. She listened to every word as he explained everything else about himself, and she gave him her support. She’d hold his hand or smile or ask the right questions or offer him comfort when he needed it. Nothing but peace and relief hung in the air between them as he attached himself to her more and more with each revelation. She hadn’t lost faith in him yet, hadn’t become jealous or angry even when he confessed less-than-shining moments. But he could see her eyelids drooping, hear the thick drowsiness in her voice, so he’d extended his slight lack of ideas for new subject matter to pretending to draw a complete blank on new topics. After a few soft kisses, he’d whispered goodnight in her ear and his fingers rubbed soft circles through her hair until she drifted to sleep.

Her legs were tangled up with his, her lips on his neck as her hot, even breaths ghosted over his skin, one arm slung loosely around his back while the other had found its way up his untucked shirt. The sensations of her flush against him were something he might never get used to; he was intoxicated with the feel of her fingers stroking his bare chest, the floral perfume wafting from her hair, the sound of her single heartbeat, the rhythmic touch of her lips against his neck with each slow breath. He couldn’t be sure he was falling asleep, but if he wasn’t, he was at least fading from consciousness as he became lost in every inch of her that was touching him, overwhelmed and yet perfectly content in her arms, as he so often was.

“Hmm…” she mumbled softly as she readjusted herself and wriggled even closer. He couldn’t help returning the small sound as he tightened his hold on her, using up what little of his consciousness that lingered to will himself to be included in whatever happy dream she indulged.

“Doctor,” she whispered into his neck. Oh. He hadn’t realized she’d woken up.

“What is it?” he whispered back as his eyes fluttered open, instantly regaining alertness.

When her only response was another, higher-pitched hum of pleasure, he understood. She was asleep. And dreaming about him. And he couldn’t breathe.

One of her legs was already between both of his, and as she rolled into him and grinded lazily against his leg, chasing after physical manifestation to whatever her brain was fueling her senses with, another soft little moan assaulted his ears. Oh, heavens, no. Sex dreams were one thing, but
this? He’d heard of it before – humans reaching a climax in their sleep without ever waking up – but certainly had never witnessed it first-hand. Was she going to keep at this? Was she about to get herself off against him?

He couldn’t let her. He couldn’t listen to her and feel her against him and imagine the contents of her dream without completely losing control. But how could he stop her? He couldn’t wake her. He’d have to explain why he woke her up, and she’d be mercilessly embarrassed when there was no need to be. The dream was out of her control, after all, and it was probably his fault for not giving her what she needed. Unless he’d been blithely unaware that she slipped away from him long enough to shag someone else some night they were together, she hadn’t gotten any from anyone for nearly two years. She was impossibly patient with him, even when he knew her reproduction-promoting hormones were twenty times more potent than his own. She had to find release somehow, and at that moment, it happened to be in sleep. Against him. Actually, using him. Blimey, just the thought was about to make him explode.

Unsteady and almost sloppy, the torture went on, sometimes a minute between her quick thrusts, others no time at all; she was asleep after all. Suddenly her hip rutted into his crotch as she rotated slightly, at the same she breathed a muted sigh into his neck, and heat flooded his cheeks as his composure faltered. He had to stop her. But he couldn’t stop her; he already established that. Maybe he could wake her, and just tell her she was shouting and he thought she’d had a nightmare. The catch was, he was rubbish at lying. And what if she remembered what was happening when she woke up? Usually when woken from a nightmare, he remembered the contents of the dream, and he was skeptical that she would believe that she’d had a nightmare when she would probably wake up feeling something quite unlike fear. He didn’t want to chance it. He had to let her finish, bite his tongue and bend all his thoughts to the most unappealing alien he could and hope she’d continue sleeping uninterrupted.

Her hip dug into the front of his trousers again and he had to cover his mouth with one hand to stop from gasping. Somehow that particular movement had to stop or he’d be flying over the edge, and he blanched at what might happen then. Their connection was stronger now than it had been the last time they were in a situation like this. A thought occurred to him then: he could lend her a hand: it would probably stop her moving.

His mind shied away from the idea instantly: she wasn’t awake to consent to a new level of intimacy. But she’d whispered out his name twice now so she must be thinking of him, and she’d made it clear on other occasions that she was ready for that kind of interaction, wanted it. Still, it didn’t sit well in his hearts. But his mounting desire to please her fused with his need for her to stop brushing against him, and his hand had drifted south in spite of his mind’s rebuke as she slid against him again. His fingers reached the waistband of her pajamas as she repeated the motion, and without his hand clamping down over his mouth, her name was on his lips in a second.

It was enough stimuli to snap her awake. She froze in place, breath catching in her throat. They were already close enough that her nerves and lust and embarrassment overwhelmed his mind at once, and, god, he wished he could make them all go away that instant. After a small clear of her throat followed by a gulp loud enough for him to hear, she let out her anxiously held breath and her head pulled away from where it was burrowed into his neck to look up at him.

“Doctor?” she asked quietly. He could sense that her dream was quite fresh in her mind, but he didn’t know if she remembered what she was doing. His stomach flipped at the prospect of what she might ask.

“Yeah?” he whispered back, avoiding a crack of his voice and doing his damndest to sound nonchalant.
“Your hand – it’s…” Yep. Still wedged between their intertwined legs was his right hand, his selfish, randy right hand. He couldn’t move it without brushing it against a few inches of her exposed stomach, and a response evaded him. The hand on his back lifted up to trace the arm attached to the offending hand, and she quickly confirmed it wasn’t her own.

“Rose, I’m sorry, it’s just… you were…” He scrambled for an excuse for his audacity. He should have just woken her straight away; embarrassment was better than her catching him, literally, red-handed.

“I know,” she interrupted his faltering shakily. “I remember. I was dreamin’ about – ” she cut herself off.

“What?” he asked. Clearly she wasn’t upset. The way she was looking at him was too much to handle, and he couldn’t blame her. Woken from a very enjoyable dream, interrupted before she was satisfied, only to find an awkward and unprepared alien bloke staring at her and fumbling with his words. He should just roll off the bed and leave the room to allow her the solitude. But he was greedy and curious just what he’d been doing to her in her dream, as if he needed to know that. It was probably going to kill him.

“Touch me,” she murmured. Oh, no, she couldn’t ask him. Please, no.

“Rose,” he pleaded, closing his eyes to escape her gaze. He wasn’t sure how he was going to refuse her this time.

“You were about to,” she whispered as she lifted her hips away from his, placing her hand over his own at her stomach and starting to direct it lower. He begged with her name again, dangerously uncertain, chest heaving in terror as his mind reminded him he couldn’t do this, other parts of him persuading him he was just excited, thrilled by her offer. She guided his hand over the waistband, over the seam of the cloth leading between her thighs as she pressed a kiss to his neck, and he caved. Lost to the caveats of his subconscious, his hand broke from her guidance to push her shoulder back onto the bed and his mouth covered hers, rushed with desire. Purposefully then, of his own volition, his hand coursed slowly down her chest and stomach and over clothes until it returned to where she’d directed it before, where she was calling out for him so strongly, and a jolt of pleasure shot through him – hers? Her hands tangled in his hair as his fingers circled over where she wanted him most, teasing where he knew she was most sensitive, under the clothes and just beneath the folds he imagined were saturated with longing for him. His lips were messy and insistent on hers and she returned his passion as her back arched at his touch, enticing him to continue.

Her lips parted to allow his name to escape, and it was sweeter than honey and he was drunk off it already; all he wanted was to make her say it again, louder, clearer. Drifting down to the column of her throat to leave her mouth available for exactly that, he was kissing roughly at her neck, his teeth scraping her skin and he knew he would be leaving marks but couldn’t bring himself to care. He relished the taste on her skin, drank in her arousal, cursed the softness of the flesh under his fingers, even through the fabric, and he was touching harder and then another shockwave of pleasure crashed over him – her. It was her sensations coursing through him in that moment. And she did say his name again, and he shuddered and groaned as he felt Rose’s pleasure just begin its crescendo, release and excitement overwhelming her mind, and he should have stopped or at least should have at least known what would happen. He realized, after, that he thought maybe he could escape himself by moving quickly, dodge what he knew was inevitable if she finished fast enough. Of course, he was wrong to.

A blurry, fleeting memory was slipping suddenly from his mind’s well-practiced grip on his subconscious: a fleet of Daleks, setting fire to Arcadia, fields strewn with bodies and scraps, blood
and metal. The red sky filled with ash and the sound of screams and lasers and death. And he stopped. His hand, his lips, his everything stopped. He cringed at himself and rolled slowly onto his back, covering his face in his hands.

“Doctor, please,” Rose was against him again in a second. “I don’t care, I can handle it.”

“Well, I can’t!” he raised his voice. Rose flinched next to him, and he hated himself more. He opened his eyes and turned to face her. “I can’t! This isn’t how this is supposed to be!” He was nearly shouting, more frustrated with each word, the realization of how wrong the situation was hitting him as he spoke. “It’s supposed to be… different. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have started. I knew I wasn’t ready for this yet. I’ll leave you alone so you…” he trailed off.

He rolled his heavy limbs reluctantly from the bed, and she didn’t reach after him, didn’t call after him. He’d been too harsh and he knew it, but he just knew she had a right to some space to herself for a few minutes, to either recover or relieve herself or think, or anything she needed to. He’d gone too far. Her steady climb had rippled through him and he was a perfect arse for taking his touch away too soon. He was so close to telling her, too. This was one thing he wasn’t sure he could even make up to her. If he knew human anatomy (and he did, exceptionally well), this was beyond teasing: it was torturing.

Only a few minutes later he decided it would be rude to walk in at any moment thereafter, so he decided not to go back in at all. Maybe she’d fall back to sleep. Maybe she’d come to get him if she wanted him back. More likely, she’d do neither, because she probably couldn’t sleep now, and probably didn’t want to see him again, not after what he’d said and, more importantly, not done. So, he just sat on the edge of his bed in silence and solitude, searching the ceiling for the best way to explain the reason for his stubborn tight lip delicately, in a way that wouldn’t frighten her but that would help her maybe understand his reluctance.

The ceiling, of course, made no reply, but as his head dropped to the floor the TARDIS rebuked him for leaving her and volunteered simple honesty, and in a timely manner. She flicked his bed just enough to toss him off it, in fact, to nudge him to return to her and tell her everything and finish what he started. His feet barely caught his lanky frame as he nearly stumbled to the floor.

“You don’t understand,” he claimed. A strong surge of disagreement permeated the room before she told him what he already suspected: it was time to open up.

Even if I am ready, I can’t just spring it on her! Still, she insisted just up and leaving was a poor choice on his part, especially after what had happened, and damn it, he knew she was right. He grumbled as he acknowledged her as he made for his door.

As he trudged his way back to her room to confront her, though, she met him in the hall, limping slightly from the tight wrap still securely over her ankle. Somehow he’d already forgotten, and instantly felt terrible she’d had to walk on her own.

“Oh, were you comin’ back?” she asked, her voice croaking like she’d been upset. And on closer look, the whites of her eyes were streaked with the pink of tears he didn’t want to see.

“Yeah,” he responded tersely, carefully holding back his hands from taking her in his arms, fearful she wouldn’t fancy such an advance.

“I’m sorry for shouting. There was no call for it. You alright?” he asked, hesitant, shifting his weight between his feet.

“Yeah, ‘m fine,” she said, but she wiped at her eyes and took a deep breath that suggested otherwise.
“‘M sorry, too. I just… I woke up and I just felt… well, I shouldn’t have pressured you like that. ‘S my fault.”

“No. You didn’t pressure me. Nothing’s your fault.” He exhaled a deep breath to the ceiling of the hall before returning her gaze. “You didn’t do anything wrong. I want this too, Rose, I hope you know that. I’m almost there, but not… quite.”

“No, I know that. I know you would’ve told me if you were.”

“You’re right, you’ll be the first to know,” he ventured a small smile for her benefit, but she didn’t return it, and he quickly swiped it from his face.

“‘M gonna go back to sleep, I think. Will you come back?” she asked, pleading with glistening eyes from beneath her eyelids, unable to lift her head to fully expose her vulnerability to him. He doubted it was a good idea to climb back into bed with her then, when they’d just crossed a new line and he was still bristling with lust from it.

“Uhm, maybe for tonight we shouldn’t – ”

“Please?” Her voice was small, barely audible.

“I’ll walk you back to bed, but, I don’t know. I don’t want – ”

“Doctor, ‘m not tryin’ to trick you,” her voice was stronger and carried volume with it this time, chin raised as she look him more directly in the eyes. It was really himself he didn’t trust to behave before she nodded off again. Though, he was slightly nervous she might fall into a less-than-wholesome dream again, and though he still wouldn’t blame her if she did, he couldn’t handle a second onslaught.

“No, I don’t think that. I’m just not sure it’s a good idea to invite more temptation.” He still remembered that damned book.

“Doctor, ‘m not askin’ you to stay so I can seduce you, or make you do whatever I want, d’you think that’s really what I’m like?” No, he didn’t. She never took advantage of him or forced him, he’d just marveled at that selflessness of hers earlier that night. She’d simply had a weak moment, while he was in a perpetual state of weakness, and it was a bad combination.

“No, I’m not saying that. I just know how hard it’s been for us lately…” Why could he never say what he was actually thinking? In his head things sounded much more encouraging.

“I just don’t want to be alone,” she insisted firmly. “Y’know, I wasn’t myself, I was comin’ off a dream and you were right there, and, your hand was…” She trailed, off shaking her head to clear the fresh memories. “Anyway. I made a mistake. ‘M not askin’ for sex, Doctor.” The word cut through the air like a knife.

“I know, you’re not asking, I know. But it just tends to happen anyway.”

“I’m askin’ to be with you. There’s a difference. If you can’t separate bein’ together with shaggin’ then I think ‘s you that’s the problem!” The truth behind her accusation gnawed at his insides. Save for a heavy sigh, he was silent for a long moment as the hurt in her eyes truly sank in, and he realized how completely selfish he sounded. Of course, he trusted her more than that.

“You’re right. I’m sorry.” Timorous to approach her on his own, he opened his arms to invite her into them, and she accepted in a moment, sinking against him as his arms wrapped around her and rubbed softly over her back, meaning to soothe her anger. But instead of soothing it, his efforts
seemed only to transform it into a more tearful variety of upset. The small sniffs and subdued gasps
that were characteristic of crying broke the fragile silence between them, and his arms gripped tighter
but he was at a loss for words. As he felt droplets of moisture saturate his shirt where her cheek was
pressed against his chest, his hearts shattered.

He could only tell her ‘it’s alright’ several times as he held her through her shaky breaths and
shudders, standing in the hall unable to move. In a few minutes, as her breathing evened out and the
patter of tears against his shirt slowed to silence, she took a deep breath and cleared her throat to
speak.

“What I saw,” she murmured, “that was nothing, was it?” He couldn’t see her face, as she was still
pressed against him. She wasn’t totally correct; it was definitely something unforgettable, a notorious
and indelible tick in his timeline, but it also wasn’t nearly the worst of everything he had stashed
away on the subject.

“Not nothing,” he whispered. “But it’s not the worst of it.” Honesty might be the best policy.

Her fingers clutched tightly at his shirt, leaving angry creases that wouldn’t be smoothed out without
an iron.

“Is that what you’re upset about?” he asked delicately, cautious not to inspire another round by
indicating his shock at the possibility. But he was shocked, he thought for sure she was upset about
him tempting and then leaving, something he’d developed a reputation for doing in recent days.

“I just… wish there was something I could do,” she sniffled.

“Rose, you’re doing it.” His fingers worked gentle circles over the back of her head as he spoke.
“Listening. And just being here with me, you know how much that’s helped me.” He did show her,
not two weeks past, the impact her presence had on his mental health.

“Yeah, I s’pose,” she murmured, before shifting uncomfortably, undoubtedly because of the
discomfort brought on by standing with the brace.

“C’mon, let’s get you back to bed.” She could walk alright, so he just linked their arms for the short
stretch of hall to Rose’s room.

As soon as she was lying back on her pillow he was by her side, wiping a falling tear from her cheek
with his thumb as he propped himself on his elbow over her.

“’M sorry, I dunno what’s gotten into me,” she whispered, helping him dry her eyes with her sleeve.

“Don’t apologize,” he replied quickly. “Just tell me what you’re thinking.” He kept his voice soft as
silk, worried of coming across demanding or startling her in the slightest. Nerves and sorrow were
evident in her eyes as she looked up at him, thinking.

“I know you’ve shared a lot with me lately. And that means a lot, it really does. But, I’m… I know
you’re keepin’ the big things from me still. We’ve never talked about that war,” her voice cracked,
“and I know that’s the reason you don’t want to do this. Or can’t. I just want to help you through it,
whatever it is. And I don’t want to force you to talk about it if you’re not ready, but it just makes me
feel, I dunno. Helpless.” She turned her head to evade his gaze, which was probably becoming a bit
frightening since his chest was being hallowed out by her words and the new hole ached to prove
her wrong. Rose was anything but helpless, in fact, helpfulness was probably one of her most
apparent qualities. The idea that she didn’t understand how much she meant to him, and how much
she’d helped him through the years, made his stomach turn and for a moment he thought he might be
sick.

“Rose, listen,” he waited for her to acknowledge him, and when she didn’t, he tilted her chin just enough to catch her eyes before he continued. “You’re not helpless.” He smoothed his thumb over her chin and along her lips, which parted as he traced a slow path over her mouth. “But you’re right, I have been putting that particular discussion off.” The back of his hand brushed along her jaw. “It’s a lot to take in. How about I tell you about it in the morning?” His fingertips stroked along her scalp before combing gently through her hair.

“Really? You think you… can?”

“I think I can.” And it was the truth, he thought he might be ready to take the leap and deal with whatever reaction she had, and she was worth taking the chance.

“It’ll be tough,” he continued with a sigh. “Don’t expect a fun story. It won’t exactly be the day I had planned.”

“I know. I’m just here to listen. But I really do think you’ll feel better if you get some of it off your chest.”

“Perhaps. But please, don’t worry about me tonight. Please. I’m perfectly alright. I should be the one apologizing. I seem to be disappointing you a lot, lately.”

“Doctor, c’mon, ‘m not that superficial.” The slight smile that pulled at the corners of her mouth shone light on the dark turn of the conversation, and he raised one eyebrow teasingly at her in response.

“Ok, I have my moments. ‘Sides, I’ve got a bunch of human biology to deal with. Maybe you just don’t understand, do you?”

“Maybe I don’t, at least not fully. But I have felt what humans feel during… that sort of thing. It’s remarkably similar. Well, I assume it wouldn’t be without the telepathy aspect. Which wouldn’t normally be a part of it, with a pair of humans, I mean.”

“D’you mean…. You could feel me? Earlier?” she asked. Bollocks. He cleared his throat as he broke from her stare.

“Yeah,” he admitted, his cheeks heating instantly.

“Will I be able to feel you, too?” Out of the corner of his eye he saw a full, genuine smile emerge, and he looked back to take it in all its glory, and couldn’t help returning it, ecstatic to find the remnants of her tears had been dashed away regardless of any embarrassment it might cause him.

“Yep.” He tapped her nose with his index finger. As long as we have some more practice. But we’ll have plenty of time for that later. For now, just rest. I won’t leave, promise. Not even for a snack,” he insisted as he turned over to lie on his back next to her, taking her hand to show her he meant it.

“Ok. I am tired,” she was already mumbling out her lethargy. “But Doctor?”

“Yeah?”

“A kiss goodnight, maybe?” she whispered with a light pull on his arm.

He linked the fingers of their lazily connected hands as he rolled towards her again, his other palm against her cheek as he pressed his lips to hers. Slowly, delicately, he apologized and took in all her
fallen tears and lulled her to sleep with the soft touches of his lips. Tugging just slightly on her bottom lip, he moistened their kiss and as their mouths moved effortlessly together even in his anxiety and her exhaustion he wondered if she knew how much he loved her. His lips could be so much more proficient at expression, it seemed.

Rose slept soundly, turned away from him under a blanket he didn’t share, and he felt terrible for making her feel she had to pull herself away, but on the plus side, the night passed without another involuntary love spell. Though he closed his eyes, slumber evaded him hour after hour, restless and uneasy at the prospect of what he was committed to doing in the morning. It was only when Rose accidentally rolled into him near morning, arm falling gracelessly onto his stomach, open mouth colliding with his shoulder, that his mind was finally put at ease enough to rest.

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Hardly two hours later, something soft and warm on his cheek coaxed him awake, and he turned to see a pair of fuzzy greenish-brown eyes peering into his own from only inches away.

“Morning,” he said, his voice low and hoarse with drowsiness, as he rubbed the sleep from his eyes to see her clearly.

“Hi,” she whispered back, greeting him with a hesitant smile. He chased after the lips that had woken him with his own, moving to pull her against him with a hand on her back, but she stopped him with a light touch to his shoulder.

“What is it?”

“Uhm… ’s just that, I’m feelin’ kind of, uhm… well, I think I need to use the loo,” she told him foggily.

“Can’t I have just one kiss first?” he asked, clueless.

“I don’t think that’s a great idea,” she insisted.

“Why not? D’you not like these lips anymore?” he asked, his bottom lip jutting out in a disappointed pout. He was mostly teasing, but he did wonder if she was just worried about the morning breath he couldn’t care less about, or if she was still a bit upset with him.

“Stop it,” she said, putting her hand over his mouth. “Y’know I love kissin’ you.” She slipped the offending lip back into his mouth with her thumb and lifted her hand away.

“Then why don’t you?” he challenged, unable to contain himself after the ego-stroking compliment, sneaking his mouth closer to hers slowly, waiting to hear another protest, and wasn’t disappointed.

“I don’t think you understand,” she whispered.

“Then help me to,” he breathed against her lips.

“Sure,” she said, pulling away. “After the loo.” She rolled quickly away from his reach and sat on the opposite edge. A tease, indeed, though not as much of one as he seemed to be.

“Can I take this off yet? Feels fine,” she gestured to the brace still secured to her ankle.

“Dunno. Probably. But I’ll have to take a look at it to be sure.” She sighed and stood to wobble towards the adjacent bathroom.
With Rose out of his presence, his mind was left with no choice but to wander as his head hit the pillow again, back to the impending discussion that would probably be laced with bits of telepathy. Some things were impossible to explain with words. He squirmed at the thought of reliving the memories he needed to show her, but he knew it was the only way they could be thoroughly connected, and he trusted her, at the very least not to leave. Still, her precise reaction and the uncertainty of being forgiven twisted his gut into a tight, little knot.

It was longer than her usual morning trip before she was climbing back onto the bed. A few suspicions had crept into his mind during that time, certainly, but the light pink flush on her cheeks and the subtle aroma of arousal as she breached his personal space made him downright desperate to know. Without having to request again, a pair of cool, minty lips were on his, and as his tongue peeked out to taste her, spearmint mouthwash mingled with a rush of endorphins and serotonin and oxytocin still flooding her system and he couldn’t help but moan achingly into her mouth. Those little chemicals were doing their job, and she likely felt sated enough for the time being, but they did nothing of the sort for him; they merely re-ignited the flame that had dwindled overnight and made him desperately hope she’d never have to do that herself again.

Rose’s gentle touches and chaste kisses gave way to his daring, greedy fingers and impassioned lips as they groveled for more of her, clutching her closer to him as his tongue demanded entrance between her lips. And on her tongue was only a more concentrated dose of her absolutely maddening taste, even more luscious than usual, and he was slipping from sanity too fast. His chest and hips nudged hers over until she was on her back, and instantly he was hovering over her, supporting himself with one elbow on the sheets as one leg founds its way between hers. Unsurprisingly, in seconds her palm was against his shoulder, pushing him back.

“Oh, Rose…” he breathed as he used all his conviction to separate his mouth from hers.

“Doctor, what’s gotten into you?” she asked with mild alarm.

“I just… can’t,” he confessed, turning his head just enough to touch his lips to the arm that lingered on him, his tongue snaking between them to taste her skin. “You taste… so… brilliant,” he managed to gasp out as he settled himself back onto the bed, taking her arm in his as he continued to trail wet kisses along her arm down to her hand.

“Do I not always?” she asked quietly, clearly taken aback by his audacity.

“You do, but… right now… this is…” he was hardly coherent. She snapped in front of his face a couple times with her free hand until he grudgingly released her.

“Look, ok, great, glad you got a tasty breakfast in, but, I’m starvin’, I’m goin’ to get some proper food,” she shoved his leg away and made to turn away from him, and all he could do was whine.

“Rooose, don’t go,” he called.

“I am goin’, and you’re comin’ too, mister,” she jabbed a finger at him. “We’ve got a lot to talk about this morning, remember?” She wasn’t going to let him seduce her out of this one, and he had to be proud of her. He groaned as he flipped over and swung his legs over the edge of the bed. He got a couple kinks out of his neck, stretched his arms languidly over his head, and wriggled his toes against the carpet to stretch out the plantar fascia before it was safe for him to stand. Embarrassingly, again, he was so tightly wrapped around Rose’s finger, it took less than a minute of snogging and some innocent human signaling molecules for his physiology to react to the extreme. He took a deep breath as he stood creakily to accompany her out of the room.

“Alright then, what’ll it be this morning?” he asked as he walked past her, not bothering to touch her
again and merely incite himself.

“Simple’s fine,” she responded as she treaded barefoot down the hall just behind him. “Toast or cereal or… something.”

“Well, *that’s* not a proper breakfast,” he chided. He had to whip up something strongly fragrant to overpower the Rose that was still assaulting his senses, now that he was so attuned to her. He’d convinced her she’d love some blueberry-oatmeal pancakes with sausage and maple syrup from New Earth, which he knew was better than the original Earth stuff. The maple trees just really knew their way with sugars the second time around, it seemed.

The mixing aromas of sickly sweet syrup, fresh fruit, sizzling meat, and bubbling, golden batter successfully blocked out all other scents, and by the time they’d finished eating, his mind was cleared of the acute desire that had so quickly and thoroughly possessed him before.

They were still at the kitchen table when it started, their plates with half-eaten pancakes and syrupy bits of sausage cooled and staled beside them, soon forgotten.

They’d run out of small talk and their extended silence was becoming more and more awkward, and he was stealing apprehensive glances at her as he waited on her to breach the subject that was hanging in the dead air between them. But when she only picked at half-eaten cakes with her fork, he knew she was too uneasy to bring it up with him first, and he couldn’t blame her, after the attitude he’d slipped into the night before.

“Rose, you sure you want to hear about this?” he whispered, and her head jerked up immediately.

“I’m sure,” she nodded once, eyeing him seriously to indicate her sincerity. He sighed as he glanced around the kitchen nervously, at a loss for how to begin.

“Where do you even want me to start?” he asked, and he knew she wouldn’t have a good answer because he’d told her next to nothing about it. How should she know where he should start? He was a stupid Time Lord with stupid questions but he shrugged it off as a symptom of his anxiety and forgave himself.

“I dunno… wherever you’re comfortable with?” He winced at her choice of words and she realized her mistake.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean…Well, I know it’s…” she flailed around her brain for the right words.

“It’s okay,” he reassured her, because it wasn’t her fault, and he couldn’t imagine being in her position, either.

“Alright,” she chuckled humorlessly, nerves manifesting in new ways as she fidgeted in her chair, hand clenching around the glass of untouched orange juice on the table next to her.

“How about you just tell me how it started?” she asked tentatively, staring into the glass, swirling the handful of ice cubes in it around surreptitiously as she waited for his response, eyes flitting from the orange liquid to his eyes cyclically.

“How does any war start?” he sighed after a long moment. “We were attacked.” And so it began, and he explained to the best of his ability the dread and panic and death inextricable from war that he was so intimately acquainted with. Of course, his composure slipped, his words became slower, his emotions cracked their way through the barrier he’d put up ages ago to lock away his subconscious as he forcefully dredged up memories he never wanted to relive.
It was only just before Cass’ death that his tongue ceased to form words altogether as his mind started to collapse in on itself, because he knew it was only a downward spiral from then on. Some sort of terrible paradox was created as he attempted to unleash what he’d endeavored to keep buried away since the wonderful woman across from him became semi-permanent company, and suddenly he was coming apart at the seams she’d skillfully sewn up for him. The very same intoxicating and painfully beautiful creature was out of her seat and climbing into his lap in an instant at the sight of his distress, her arms wrapping around him in embrace as her legs straddled his own to whisper encouragements he couldn’t hear, rub her hands soothingly up and down his back.

He crushed her against him, smothering hyperventilation into her shoulder as he continued to tell his story with his mind, persevered with vivid memories taking the place of words he could no longer say as his limbs began to tremble. Because he knew it was time, she needed to know the truth so they could move on from it, one way or another. A small part of him clutched at a fierce hope that their ‘moving on’ would be in the direction of the intimacy they’d been skirting around for prolonged days, but the majority of him was overtaken with darkness.

She seemed to understand, he refused to think of himself as or respond to the title ‘Doctor’ when he would more properly be titled ‘soldier,’ even ‘murderer,’ and she didn’t ask why, didn’t have to. Surely she could feel the hopelessness and desolation that racked through him as he tossed the name he’d chosen aside, burdened with the forecast of grisly days to come.

And there were. The front lines, an ash-filled sky and scrap-covered ground, thousands of looming Dalek ships closing in, the sickly sound of merciless lasers and the maniacal chant of their race’s paramount word as comrades, friends and family dropped around them, the excruciating continuum of explosions that would burst human ear drums, flames blazing around what was once a mighty citadel in the distance as it crumbled to rubble and smoke. His terror and loss and bloodlust were bared as he was exposed to her, and Rose faced and coped with each in its turn, never squirming from his hold on her.

He endeavored to show how months went on this way, months that became years that became decades as hope dwindled and the body count became a planet count. The war extended through time and space and became an infinite hell, with no escape from the one-eyed, manically supremacist, polycarbide-shelled demons. Unknowing, she witnessed friends die, family, but he didn’t reveal any of their identities, for fear of overwhelming her to the point of a sheer nervous breakdown as he was inclined to have that very moment. Without him selecting it voluntarily, his mind skipped ahead, the culminating blast of the war striking his senses, delivering the final blow to his shaky, unstable composure.

As he stifled a cry into her neck, she was pushing herself back.

“Doctor,” she shook him by the shoulders until his eyes were forced open and the assault stopped. “’s alright,” she choked out through the tears streaming down her cheeks. “I understand.” Both her hands were on his face as his chest still heaved and he swallowed down tears of his own, fighting to be strong for her.

“Rose… don’t cry… I’m sorry…” he managed to breathe out, his quivering hands gripping her arms to ensure her hands didn’t leave his cheeks – he thought she might be the only thing holding his head together at that moment. He showed her nothing, but he was so vulnerable, so exposed, an unsheathed nerve ending, waiting to be stimulated with further pain, he knew his uninhibited grief and horror and guilt were still crashing over her.

“Listen to me,” she sniffed as droplets continued to fall between them. “’s not your fault, you hear me?”
“But, Rose, it is,” he cringed, preparing for the worst.

“It was just the Daleks, yeah?” she cried. “You’re… one of the good guys.” With all her effort she strove to fight for him, to convince him he’d done nothing wrong, but he could feel the pieces clicking into place in her mind. What the devil had labeled him as – the killer of his own kind. The sweeping guilt that filled the TARDIS when he first left her behind.

“No, it was me,” he insisted between gasps for air.

“Stop it,” she pleaded, closing her eyes in anguish. “You can’t have,” she whimpered. But he had to tell the whole truth.

And so they were back at ground zero, where he revealed his choice amidst a burning, doomed planet laden with death: Gallifrey or the universe. His screams filled the bleeding air around them as indecision clawed at his brain, his hearts ripped in two as the heavens shoved this ultimatum on him. Why him? Over and over he yelled, begged for anyone, anyone to take his place, to detonate the lethal weapon he stood shuddering beside so he could die. But no one was coming to rescue him, no one else would do what he was tasked with. He shouted and cried his damnation at the Daleks and the universe until he was hoarse and he slumped to the ground, utterly defeated as tears streamed tracks of dirt and blood from his face. But his palms closed over the perilous device as he finished his contract, praying vehemently for death to take him, to end the existence that had diminished to nothing but destruction and futility. With his last thought he dared to hope for forgiveness from what he hoped would be his final act.

Everything cut to black as his attention returned fully to Rose, who’d let go of his face and was sobbing against his shirt, arms around his back and clinging as though for dear life. Saltwater dampened his shoulder as muffled cries entered his ears and stabbed straight to his gut, her pain shooting through him as real and horrific as the pain he’d just had to experience a second time.

It was a new brand of torment: she wasn’t angry with him, but she was devastated. It was unadulterated sorrow and empathy that streamed uncensored from her heart to both of his own as she ached to comfort him.

“Shh… Rose, it’s alright,” he struggled to sound normal and level-headed but tears were in his eyes too, still staggering from the psychic blitz, and his voice cracked and betrayed him. “I’m okay now,” he tried to convince her again, rubbing the back of her head and gripping her waist to hold her tighter than physics should allow.

“I couldn’t have done it,” she said between shaky breaths. “I dunno how you did. I’m not strong enough. ‘M so sorry, Doctor.” She fell tearful again as she commiserated with him, as no one else ever had.

“Rose,” he whispered, tilting her chin up from his shoulder to look at him, and he nearly backed out of asking, broken at the sight of red, swollen eyes and wet cheeks and her trembling lower lip. “I still wonder if I did the right thing. But I think I did,” he confessed seriously, because he had to. Selfish, yes, but he’d never told anyone. Never consulted anyone or discussed the ethics, never was forgiven or granted amnesty for what he’d done, all he had to go off of were his own morals, rocky and volatile at best.

“Y’did,” she croaked. “There was nothing else you could do. I’d be dead, too, then if it wasn’t for you,” she could hardly finish a statement without being racked with sobs. “But… doesn’t mean it wasn’t… hard. Impossible… ‘m so sorry… you were so… helpless and… alone and… scared.” And he realized, she knew the very worst, and wasn’t angry, wasn’t judging him. She was saddened, and selfishly he was relieved, a crushing weight was immediately lifted from him. But his number one
priority became Rose in that instant, to help her recover from his trauma and get her through the
thoughts that weren’t her responsibility. His own strength returned shockingly quickly despite having
relived the most horrendous day of his life, intensely motivated to care for her in that moment, to
erase her pain.

“I know. I tried to warn you.” He tried to speak gently without refuting her very valid concerns.
“But, Rose, I’m not anymore. I was. But look where I am now? I’m not alone anymore. You’re here
with me.” His hand swiped at her falling tears, but as fresh ones simply rolled over his fingers instead
of her cheeks, he gave up after a few seconds.

“But what could I possibly do?” she asked in despair, looking to the ceiling rather than back into his
inquisitive eyes.

“You’ve already done it. Look at me,” she did. “I’m a new man. Think of who I was when we met.
I’m different. And it’s not just the face. I’m better. And it’s because of you.” His hand stroked
through her hair soothingly. “New, new Doctor,” he smiled ever so cautiously. She let out two short
chuckles but didn’t smile, but he did think the flow of tears was starting to slow.

“Just take a deep breath,” he urged, both his hands coming around to rub circles into her back, easing
her tight muscles and relaxing the knots that had formed in their time seated together. Her weight
slumped back against his hands as her unsteady breathing slowly evened out so she could talk more
clearly. And, praise whatever holy being there might be, tears ceased falling from her eyes after a
few minutes of his touches and her steady breathing.

“There we are, that’s better,” he whispered, wiping the remnants of moisture from around her eyes
and her cheeks. “Now what can I do?” he asked, prepared to give her basically anything she wanted.
If she asked to shag on the plates and cold food he’d probably oblige.

“What can you do?” she retorted, astonishment in her features as she shook her head in disbelief.
“You stupid lump,” she teased, whacking his head lightly with one hand and blessing him with the
tiniest of smiles. “I should be askin’ you that.”

“Alright, then, want to know what you can do?” he conceded.

“What’s that, then?”

“Let me kiss you?” She sighed but acquiesced with a nod, clearly emotionally exhausted and
unprepared for even slightly more than that.

His eyes watched hers, ensuring they weren’t about to start leaking on him again as he pulled her
close again, and pressed his lips to hers with the gentlest of pressure as his hands cupped her face. He
emptied his thoughts of the grave subject matter and suddenly it was just his gratitude and relief and
happiness and love that flowed from his mouth to hers. Love. Yes, he’d just told her he loved her, in
the most profound Gallifreyan form of the concept. Because he did love her, so much that it was
actually making him ache inside. He should have known, her empathy was powerful enough that she
would react this way when he finally let her in on his deep, dark secret. He wasn’t worthy enough,
redeemable enough, but she thought he was, and blimey, every damned cell in his body loved her
with all its existence. Still, he didn’t feel like he was ready to tell her out loud, in English or some
other language the TARDIS could translate. It was an intimate sensation that he wasn’t ready to let
slip from the confines of their private connection, one that was growing stronger every day. Was
there a need for it to, ever?

He knew she wouldn’t understand the foreign sounds she’d heard from him, but she must have
sensed they were important. Her arms came around his neck as she scooted forward until her hips
couldn’t move, pulling his chest against her own as her fingers slid along his neck and into his hair, and she was kissing him back. She matched his gentleness and slowly, deliciously, she parted her lips to take each of his into her mouth in turn, and it was enough to make him forget everything that ever existed except for Rose. The taste of her soft lips, the mild tug on his hair as her fingertips coursed through it, the rush of pleasure as her tongue just teased his bottom lip.

Even then, she amazed him. A surge of intense compassion coursed through him, wrapped around the anguished, frigid part of him that lingered in the war like a soft, warm quilt. Comfort followed, an overwhelming calming sensation like swinging lazily in a hammock on a summer afternoon, no responsibilities, no regrets. Shining brighter than a blazing star was forgiveness, radiating through the hidden rooms of his soul, instantly sending the shadows it found dashing off where it would take him ages to find them again. A exquisite tranquility spread from her lips to his core, and his body and mind became at ease in tandem, tense muscles relaxing, anxious thoughts subsiding as only one replaced them: everything was going to be alright. He hummed appreciatively into her mouth as his mind told her again, whispered the depth of his affection in a dead language.

Rose, he addressed her in her native tongue then. Thank you. The words were severely inadequate for the gratitude she deserved from him for what she’d just given him, so he ensured the sentiment was thoroughly received by concentrating on just how thankful he was she was in his life, that she was in his lap in that moment, that she stayed with him even when he should have scared the daylights out of her. She had harnessed the power of his telepathy very quickly, considering what little practice they had, to gift him with her unending compassion, and it was an unmistakable sign that she felt for him as he did for her. She loved him. It’d be impossible to connect with him this way if she didn’t. And he’d never fully believe it.

He sensed a strain in her resolve, and he thought he knew the source: she was trying to say something in return.

You’ve got it, he encouraged her, ecstatic he didn’t have to leave her lips to tell her. Words aren’t as easy as emotions. They aren’t as powerful. Just focus on every word, every syllable, even, and give it time.

After a few minutes of tender kisses, she managed to pass the thoughts stuck in her mind over to him. You’re welcome, she thought, smiling against his lips in victory. Did I help at all?

Yes, he assured her with a rush of sincerity. You were brilliant. Can’t you feel how much it’s helped? He stopped his flood of words and let her feel himself, all of himself, where relief took the place of dread, where he’d accepted the first offering of mercy he’d been personally given since the war, where he was healing by the second and overcome with love for the human in his arms. Surely, Rose knew what love felt like, because she answered him with another burst of love of her own.

He was giggling against her lips, absolutely dazed by it all – the exhaustion from their bout of anguish and tears, the sheer, overjoyed relief at having finally jumped over this hurdle, the one he’d feared only second to losing her altogether for so long, the excitement that they were connected so strongly now, able to share anything at will, the pure pleasure he could never get enough of that she was, in fact, sitting in his lap, and her lips felt marvelous against his own.

She pulled back, then.

“What’re you laughin’ at, mister?” and the vocal interruption felt strange in context.

“Nothing. This. Everything. It’s been a mad hour,” he crudely summarized their encounter.

“Understatement.” She squirmed on top of him. “D’you fancy movin’ someplace else? We could go
to the telly room, watch a silly show and just relax? Or maybe, y’know, do more of this,” she toyed with the buttons of his jacket.

“Not a bad idea,” he agreed, and she climbed off him and took his hand as he stood to join her. His eye caught on the still-intact brace around her ankle and he paused.

“Although,” he started again. “We should really stop and take a look at that ankle. My guess is it’s good as new by now.”
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Dang, I struggled to edit this big-time. I know you guys have been waiting to see just which side of the ledge these two will fall off of, and I hope I'm not about to disappoint you. Please do leave feedback, if you're so inclined! I always love hearing what you have to say.

Note: Additional scene inserted for my own purposes.

(damn it all) *looks away and hopes no one notices the rating change*

It took them a few days to recover from the grave conversation – no, it was deeper than a conversation, it was more of a mutual experience – they had when he finally tore down what she believed were the last of his emotional walls. Trudging through her tears and his dread, he confessed something that she realized had been haunting him since she’d met him, and they’d hardly left the kitchen before she noticed just how heavy a weight was lifted from his shoulders. The weight she’d always wanted lifted from him. And it became palpable in the always-slightly-chilled air of the TARDIS, in the atmosphere; she might have even bet money on the fact the TARDIS herself was emitting better vibes from the console.

Sure, they spent the rest of the day sprawled on the couch in front of the television, too emotionally weak to handle a trip outside, but she figured they deserved as much, if not more. For a while they alternated between fluffy Disney romances and each of their favorite sitcoms, slumped against the back of the couch, the Doctor’s arm around her while she huddled into his side. She pushed him over when she was tired of sitting and he dragged her down with him, arms curling around her stomach as he snuggled up behind her, his chin resting on her shoulder. His arm went numb and he complained until she let him slip it from under her, and she called him a whiner until he quieted her with kisses at her neck, pulling her hair back to reach the tender skin beneath.

The Doctor was on the mend, and Rose tried her hardest to convince herself she was fine, but his caustic memories weren’t something either of them could simply erase or mask with an expensive cover-up, and occasionally one or both of them would be struck with remnants, ghosts of what they’d seen. But if Rose couldn’t hold back another round of tears on his behalf, the Doctor sensed the aching in her heart before the droplets could fall, and gingerly he rolled her over to soothe her fears with his lips. With tender kisses and arms holding her tight he consoled her, sympathetic currents of hope and reassurance flowing from his mind to her own.

And if the Doctor was silent, without chuckles or commentary through an entire episode of *Friends*, she only had to nudge his arm and he’d release his grip on her waist so she could turn over and do the same for him. It took stronger passion – rougher kisses and tastes of her tongue to pull him back out of the past, to bring him relief from ancient sorrow and stamp out fresh guilt that he feared he’d burdened her with himself. And as her fingernails combed through his hair one of those times, he accidentally told her through their link just how thoroughly enjoyed it with words he’d never say out loud. They both laughed to smooth out the awkwardness, beginning to really consider the consequences of the unfamiliar candidness that would accompany the reduced barriers between them.

They hardly left the couch that day, enraptured in mutual comfort, basking in an intimate closeness
like they’d never shared before, intoxicated with the taste of each others’ affectionate kisses. After a restful night on the couch, bodies and minds closely intertwined as they slept peacefully and soundly together, the Doctor took her to Barcelona, the planet, since they’d never actually made it there, and he spent the day getting them strange exotic food to sample and introducing her to old friends as they walked through towering urban centers whizzing with hovercrafts. He wanted to give her an ‘accurate sense of the culture,’ as he explained himself.

The Doctor was unable to turn down an offer of hospitality so they ended up dining with a welcoming family that looked human enough, though with orange-tinted skin that gave them away. Rose had gasped aloud as she discovered the dog that wandered over to them, wagging its tail and barking like normal, was completely missing its snout, but the Doctor had tapped her arm with a warning glare and she smiled and stroked behind its ears anyway, withholding further questions or comments about it. It wasn’t until they were curled up under a quilt in a guest bedroom together he explained how different they were from Earth dogs, and that their small mouths had dual function for taste and scent (though not before they both giggled like teenagers over his mate’s emphasis on the fact that the guest bedroom was soundproofed).

The following day they took an adventure through more rural areas, hiking across geographical wonders of the planet and covering some major historical landmarks, which would of course have been incomplete without sporadic history lesson from the Doctor. They finished the night watching a sunset like nothing on Earth. Holding hands sprawled over the Doctor’s coat on thick, squishy grass also quite unlike the Earth’s, they watched bright colors slowly succumb to the dark blues of night before finally heading back to the blue box awaiting their return.

The trip was a welcome break from the emotional stress they’d been through, and very fortunately completely devoid of danger or mishaps or hostile species. But the lack of privacy under the hospitality of the aliens, and then the fact that she was so tired as they finally returned to the TARDIS, made them scarcely able to discuss anything remotely serious either night. Once she’d showered and curled against the Doctor’s side on the sofa again (they decided they liked it better for cuddling), her consciousness lingered for only a few minutes.

So as the Doctor had woken her that morning, a plate of fresh fruit and a cheesy omelet with toast waiting for her in the kitchen and ‘another exciting day ahead’, as he’d put it, she was thrilled they were back to enjoying adventures together without the anxiety and tension. But she couldn’t stop the nagging at the back of her mind that that she wanted to ask him when he’d be ready for – well, a physical intimacy to match their emotional one.

She decided it could wait another day as she indulged his particularly happy mood.

“No way! Why didn’t I think of this? It’s great!” Rose beamed at the Doctor, linking her arm through his as they strolled through a London neighborhood, a banner overhead announcing the 2012 Olympics.

“Only seems like yesterday a few naked, Greek blokes were tossing a discus about, wrestling with each other in the sand while crowds stood around… no, wait a minute, that was Club Med!” his shoulder nudged her as he shuffled his body against hers, laughing at his own joke. Rose had never seen the Doctor quite as happy, as unrestrained, as practically giddy as he had been since he’d woken her that morning by leaping onto their couch.

But they’d hardly walked a hundred meters before Rose noticed the signs: dozens of missing children.

“Doctor, you should really look at this!” Rose called to him, as he hadn’t noticed the photographs in the midst of his excited rambling about some sort of cakes with edible ball bearings. Of course, once
he’d discovered her alarm regarding the well-being of the aesthetically ordinary strip of homes, he was just as curious what was causing the disappearances. Within a moment he was running off to investigate, knowing she’d catch up when she fancied to. The Doctor didn’t tug her along places quite like he did before he regenerated; Rose liked to think she’d taught him that she didn’t like being ordered about and condescended like she couldn’t handle herself. It was nice, having the independence but being able to work together simply because they enjoyed it and they made a great team, as equals – sort of. Maybe ‘counterparts’ was a better word. Or, as the Doctor would later flirtatiously suggest, like a pair of coppers on an investigation.

And that wasn’t the first episode of Doctor-ly flirting of the day. She’d never used the word to describe his behavior, but something about the way he was acting made her at a loss for another term. He was all hugs and superfluous touching and alluring eyes, and ridiculous as it seemed he’d somehow reached a mental state that he interpreted her exclamation of ‘beautiful boy’ directed at a cat as a compliment to himself. She didn’t let his ego get away with that one, but internally she marveled at how affectionate he’d become in such a short time. It was driving her hormones mad and toying with her self-control, and it certainly convinced her to have that talk with him later in the evening.

They spent the first part of the day searching for clues regarding the lost children, and finally found the source of the extraterrestrial occurrences in the home of a young girl named Chloe who lived with only her mother. Some tiny and very family-oriented alien had got inside her head in its desperation for companionship and wasn’t letting her go until it had kidnapped as many improvised family members as it could – in the form of the neighborhood kids.

After finding out the party responsible for her possession, they’d stopped by the TARDIS so the Doctor could try to trace an energy signature from the creature’s crashed pod, and from there attempt to return it. Before she could prevent it, they were arguing over whether the Doctor was ‘taking sides’ with the Isolus.

“I sympathize, that’s all,” explained the Doctor as she helped him piece together the device between his hands she’d already forgotten the name of.

“The Isolus has caused a lot of pain for these people,” she insisted.

“It’s a child. That’s why it went to Chloe – two lonely, mixed-up kids,” he continued before gently blowing dust off the contraption.

“Sounds to me like a temper tantrum ‘cause it can’t get its own way.”

“It’s scared! Come on, you were a kid once,” he defended it still. “Binary dot?” he asked for whatever she still held in her palm.

“Yeah, and I know what kids can be like,” she retorted, handing the part to him. “Right little terrors.”

“Gum.” The Doctor held out a palm for the gum she wasn’t finished chewing, and she reluctantly dropped it from her mouth and into his hand. She knew it wasn’t any more intimate than their increasingly frequent snogs, but it was still a first for him to ask for anything straight out of her mouth. She brushed over it without making a big thing of it.

“I’ve got cousins,” she went back to her argument. “Kids can’t have it all their own way, that’s part of bein’ a family.”

“What about trying to understand them?” asked the Doctor, still fidgeting with the newly constructed gadget in his hands and avoiding eye contact with her.
“Easy for you to say, you don’t have kids,” she alleged, and with his next words her stomach dropped.

“I was a dad once.” He was calm, casual, matter-of-fact, and he still wasn’t looking at her, instead focusing all his attention on the device, ensuring it at least appeared functional.

“What did you say?” she gaped, but he didn’t look up, instead leaping from his seat and dashing across the console once he was convinced it was ready. He continued to ramble on for a few seconds but her ears didn’t hear anything else from his mouth when they registered he wasn’t expanding on his statement. She stood, dead on her feet, staring at him in disbelief for several solid sentences she couldn’t remember if she tried. Well, at least she wasn’t wondering why they hadn’t taken their leap yet – there was more to tell her, after all.

It made perfect sense, she supposed. He said there’d been others he’d fallen for, he was centuries old… of course he’d have had kids. Why hadn’t she considered it before? Stupidly she’d assumed that since he didn’t visit them or talk about them they didn’t exist; but everyone from his home planet was gone, and immediate family would have been no exception. It suddenly made the revelation of days before somehow even worse than it already was. She supposed they’d be having another important conversation that night and made every effort to shrug off her surprise and the slight offense she took that he hadn’t mentioned it yet. She tried to focus on the fact that he at least planned to tell her at some point, or he wouldn’t have brought it up – he knew better than that by now. With a few deep breaths she composed herself and resigned to leave the discussion she wanted right that moment for later, once they’d rescued the girl and the street, sighing internally that she was so proficient at prioritizing. She tuned back in just as the Doctor was saying,

“…warp drive, wormhole refractors… you know the thing you need, most of all? You need a hand to hold.” She wasn’t exactly sure what he was on about, so she decided it would be better to point at the signal they were hoping for emanating from the screen rather than try to tell him. The Doctor saw her outstretched hand and misinterpreted the gesture, thinking she meant to give him ‘what you need most of all,’ and he slapped his hand over hers with a delighted grin that immediately chipped away at the frustration towards him building in her gut. She laughed, still in awe of how relaxed and child-like himself he’d become in the last few days.

“No, look, ‘m pointin’,” she chuckled, gesturing to the monitor. And so, with a quick glance he was off, dashing down the ramp and out the doors shouting something excitedly that she couldn’t quite reciprocate. Her thoughts still lingered on what he’d said and her brain fired off theory after theory of how many, which gender, what mothers, how old…

She realized he was already out the door and shook her head, clearing the torrent of thoughts and stashing them in a closet for later before following him back outside. Exactly where, as it turned out, the universe really threw a wrench into the works. Because just as she was getting back into calculating how to solve the problem of finding and digging a ship out of solid asphalt, the Doctor vanished. Along with the TARDIS.

There went the universe, thrusting her headfirst into another test of her independence, to prove she was worthy to be at the Doctor’s side. Because this sure as hell wouldn’t be the last time he got into trouble while the fate of the city or the country or the planet or even the universe hung in the balance. She’d saved his life twice before, and she could do it again. Somehow she was confident in that fact, and that confidence may have just been what allowed her to succeed.

All things considered, digging the spaceship out of the freshly set tar with a stolen council pickaxe, hustling to the venue to chuck it into the burning torch as its runner sprinted to set off the Olympics, and helping Chloe and her mum fight off the evil drawing of Chloe’s dad were at least moderately
impressive for a day’s work.

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All the drawn-up children were reappearing in the streets and alleys and front yards of the block, and the crowd at the gargantuan stadium reappeared in their seats when she saw him, collecting the torch from the ground and running it and the tiny ship to its destination. Her heart had grown heavy as she started to wonder if the TARDIS’ power was too much for the cure, if it prevented the drawing from reverting to reality once again, and relief flooded through her at the sight of her exuberant, wild-haired Doctor as he jogged his way to the stage. And she knew just the thing to greet him with when he returned to her.

And before he’d finished his first bite, Rose couldn’t resist leaping into his arms.

Savoring their lovely hug of reunion in the street, that had nearly knocked them both down in their excitement, she let slip in the calming relief she found in his arms that she feared she’d lost him, but he called the evening ‘one for lost things being found,’ and their earlier conversation had popped into her head.

It was only after they’d stared stupidly happy at each other’s mere presence for a few moments and they’d both ensured they were alright and without injury that she brought it up again, halfway through the Doctor’s cupcake with edible ball bearings. As they strolled down a fairly unpopulated road, most residents either at the games or indoors reuniting with lost little ones, she thought he wouldn’t mind a slightly premature breach of the subject.

“So… you’re a dad?” she asked quietly, staring at the asphalt as the Doctor sunk his teeth into another bite of cake. She felt his eyes on her but she didn’t meet them, nervous of his reaction.

“Yeah,” he replied somberly after swallowing. “A granddad, too.”

Her heart might have crumbled, or she might have felt sickened at how consumed with love and desire she was for a man who’d had grandchildren, but all her thoughts disintegrated as she saw them. Three foot tall, brilliant little kids that quickly grew to promising young women and men, before long they were wearing the same formal garb he’d told her he used to wear. He’d stopped them walking and was staring at her gravely, brow pulled together, lips in a terse line. She was still startled because they hadn’t used the hands-only route for several days. She looked back at him, pushing aside the sorrow so she could nod slightly, encouraging him.

They’d grown up and he didn’t see them as often, but still they were family, and they got together on occasion to party and feast like true Time Lords. With a tug of reluctance the Doctor revealed the next generation as well, his heart swelling with love and pride over a new set of younglings he could call grandchildren. One of which he turned out developing quite a bond with, and as she saw a beautiful young woman called Susan next to what she remembered was his first incarnation, she was struck to disbelief. Her face was familiar, and she struggled to remember how on earth it could have been when she suddenly recalled: she’d seen her the day of her and the Doctor’s first proper kiss. And the sight of her crying for help amidst the wreckage of the planet had been what caused him to flee from the room before they’d really progressed anywhere. Stunned, she yanked her hand away from him, suddenly unable to see any more.

“Rose,” he called immediately, his tone mollifying. “I just wanted to tell you the truth.”

“I know,” instantly regretting the movement when he recoiled slightly, confused. She took his hand in hers again as her expression softened to one of apology and empathy, brushing her thumb over his skin in a soothing pattern.
“Was it the worst part? Losing them?” she asked, hardly above a whisper as she stepped forward to allow them even more privacy.

Yes. She heard it loud and clear, but he nodded anyway, his gaze falling to his feet as he did. The best thing she could think of was to throw her arms around his neck, pulling him against her frame until he followed her lead, arms circling around her back, hands clutching at her coat as she heard the soft splat of frosting against the street. But she could get him another one so she didn’t bother with it, just holding him, breathing him in, sending him wave after wave of apologies and comforting thoughts she was sure wouldn’t be helping.

‘I’m sorry for what I said, before,’ she told him explicitly now. ‘I was just angry, I didn’t mean what I said about kids. I have cousins, and I love ‘em, I was just frustrated.

I know you didn’t mean it. Besides, you didn’t even know.

Still, I shouldn’t have said it. Are you alright?

I’m alright. I just wanted you to see them, when they were laughing and happy, not afraid or being drafted. It’s the way I’m gonna remember them forever.

She had no clue what to say in response to the beautiful but heart-wrenching sentiment, but she just squeezed him tighter, turning her head to press a kiss to his neck.

It’s alright, you don’t have to say anything. Right, she kept forgetting she didn’t have to consciously convey words to him for him to understand anyway, intertwined like this. When she returned her focus to him, allowing herself to open up further and feel him, she realized he wasn’t in depths of despair she might have thought. Very clearly, he loved and missed them dearly, with every fiber of his being, but there was peace, and gratitude he could finally share them with someone, mingled with it, softening his sorrow until he could manage it. The terrors of the war were not what he associated his children with.

I know I probably should have told you this before. He pulled away from her embrace but took both her hands in his, playing with her fingers and gliding his own over her palms.

Well, a lot before. I was just worried it’d give you the creeps, finding out exactly how ancient I am.

I already knew that, she smirked. Sorry, Doctor, doesn’t change a thing.

So much adoration marked his gaze then she had to turn away, doubtful whether she deserved it for something as simple as not being disgusted he’d had grandchildren. Blimey, it was bloody well important to him as and to not support and appreciate him would be selfish, cruel, downright inhumane. But somehow he failed to see it that way, unsurprisingly.

Thanks for telling me. You don’t have to tell me everything about ‘em now. She turned back to him. Just, whenever it feels right. He nodded in acknowledgement, seeming to agree with her that they couldn’t handle another heart-wrenching recollection so soon after the first, before reeling her in by her arm against him for another crushing hug, and she knew he would.

“So,” the Doctor said aloud as he disengaged them. He looked down to the black ground somberly. “Where can I get another one of those?” She maneuvered around to stare down at the splattered, dirtied cake coloring the road just behind her feet.

“C’mon, follow me,” she smiled slowly, tugging him by the hand.

“Just a tick. Got to pick this up off the street,” he broke from her hand to dig into his pocket, retrieving a plastic bag and scraping as much as he could of the cake that fell (of course) frosted-side
down onto the pavement.

“Good call. The street was spotless when we got here, and I already had to pick a giant hole in it. The council might have us arrested if they find it.”

“Ah, well, it’s a road, it’s gonna get dirtied up eventually,” he rationalized, shoving the plastic bag back in his pocket with no noticeable distension until they found a bin he could toss it in.

It only took them a few minutes to reach the tourist-y stand they were selling the Olympic themed sweets, and the Doctor was in the middle of ordering a half a dozen of them when she interrupted.

“Make it seven, I s’pose.” The Doctor raised an eyebrow at her. “What? They must be good the way you keep goin’ on about ‘em.” He nodded with a grin and ordered seven, somehow presenting the proper currency to the bloke behind the counter.

“So, what now?” Rose asked as they ambled lazily down the street again, arm in arm, the Doctor in the middle of his third cake.

“We’re gonna go to the games! It’s what we came for!”

“So, give us a clue,” she said, nudging his arm. “What events do we do well in?”

“Well, I will tell you this. Papua New Guinea surprises everyone in the shot put.”

“Really?” she asked, disbelief coloring her features. A mischievous grin was his only answer as he whirled around playfully, never breaking their contact. “Doctor, are you serious right now?” she asked again, hardly able to speak without bursting into laughter or finding some way to touch him, to never fully let go for another second.

“Wait and see, wait and see,” he teased. She might have pressed him, but no objections came to mind over staying in London a few days to watch the games themselves. The chances of another catastrophe unfolding in the same town in the same week were minimal, and she could use a nice calm week or so with the Doctor that they could perhaps use to focus on themselves.

“You know, they keep tryin’ to split us up, but they never, ever will.” It may have been a naïve sentiment, even juvenile, but she was riding the high of rescuing him and her stomach was in knots over what might happen while they were stationary in 2012 London, when they weren’t lounging about watching expert sport stars strut their skills.

“Never say never, ever.” Abruptly the Doctor halted his steps, tugging on her hand as he turned to her so she would mirror his movements. Really? Yes, she remembered their fateful conversation on that couch, of course. The Doctor was not only afraid he’d lose her; his instincts made him nearly sure of it. The only unresolved factor was the time frame of their separation. She didn’t want him dwelling on whatever portent of doom had struck him, and seeking only to cheer him up she returned to her overly optimistic demeanor.

“Nah, we’ll always be okay, you and me.” When he neither agreed nor opposed the sentiment, she tapped on the back of his arm. “Don’t you reckon, Doctor?” His attention was focused on the sky, his gaze seeming to pierce through the fireworks to somewhere much further.

“Something in the air, something coming… a storm’s approaching.” Why’d he have to ruin a positive sentiment with his pessimism? His mood had been almost insufferably joyful the entire day, and she couldn’t figure out why he’d think of ruining the streak now.

“What’re you on about?” she asked, fronting annoyance to cover over how she was instantly on
edge that he was about to get distant again. She searched the sky for whatever he was intently watching, but of course saw nothing except the light show they were already missing most of, she guessed.

“Hmm,” he sighed in deep thought before turning to her. “I just thought, for a second… I saw…” he narrowed his eyes as he searched the sky again, but something told her whatever he saw was strictly in the confines of his mind.

“Saw what?” she asked, stroking along the arm of his coat. He turned back to her with a lighter expression, creases in his forehead smoothing out as he caught her worried expression.

“Well, it could just be the fireworks. Y’know, explosions getting to my head.” He was making it up, humoring her, but somehow she was glad for it.

“I think it’s definitely the fireworks.” Whatever he’d seen, it could wait. She didn’t want the night to be a depressing one.

“What do you say we get a better view?” he asked, suddenly smiling like nothing was wrong, eyebrows reaching for the sky he suggested taking them to.

“From up there?” she beamed, and he clicked his tongue with a wink in affirmation.

“What else is the TARDIS for!”

“Oh!” she chuckled warmly.

Walking back to the TARDIS, they were chatting about which events neither of them could miss out on, because they certainly couldn’t watch the entire thing. They’d be bored out of their minds. And the Doctor was being… different again. His thumb stroked along her hand as they walked, stealing more glances her way than usual with wide grins despite the white frosting lining his lips and teeth, even twirling her around in the street every few steps in his elation, clearly leaving behind whatever ominous sentiment had assaulted him before. Every touch shot electricity through her, as she was already a live wire, desire for him already kindled from their overly physical interactions during the day and worsened by his suddenly too-sweet behavior.

“Oh no!” he shouted suddenly through yet another mouthful of cake.

“What!” she yelled back, startled.

“They’re nearly over!” He gestured with what she thought was his fifth cake in the direction of the fireworks.

“Well then, let’s go!” She yanked on his hand and suddenly they were both running, laughing at their childlike impulsiveness as they sped towards the TARDIS until the Doctor was choking on the cake in his mouth and they had to stop a few meters away. Once he’d swallowed it safely with the help of her hands patting his back, his episode only led to another bout of giggles, both of them growing red and stumbling as they did. Onlookers might have thought they were pissed, but the reality was they were ridiculously drunk only off each other, and increasingly so.

They’d made it to the TARDIS in no time at all, the Doctor skillfully settling them in the air, stilling the turbulence as he munched through his last bit of cake. He assured her they were in ‘stealth mode’ as she opened the door at his prompting, and was blown away by the sight. The explosions weren’t a hundred meters away, blinding her with a rainbow of colors like she’d never seen before, the nuances of the splintering bits and the multi-directionality of the blast catching her eye like they never would on the ground. From below they always seemed two-dimensional, dancing lights on a
backdrop of the stars in the night, but from here, it was another experience entirely. A bit frightening, she would venture, if she wasn’t on the ship she felt safer in than her own home, with the man she trusted with her life more than anyone else in the universe.

“So, what do you think?” The Doctor whispered, suddenly right behind her as she stood still mesmerized by the multicolored explosions. His arms wrapped around her stomach as his head came to rest on her shoulder, eyes also watching the light show. Her curves molded to his body as she leaned back into him, hands stroking lightly along his arms.

“S’s beautiful. I’ve never seen fireworks from this close up before. But shouldn’t it be louder?” the thought suddenly occurred to her. From the ground the bursts would sometimes hurt her ears, even in recent years, but she was experiencing no discomfort whatsoever.

“The TARDIS is blocking most of the noise,” he explained quietly, turning his head until his lips just brushed her neck. He lingered there for a moment, inhaling a few slow breaths in which she was sure he was picking up several scents undetectable to her. The physical contact was now well beyond her tolerable limits and she would be ready to explode if he kept this up. She’d already planned to take some time to herself in the spacious guest bathroom after this show had finished, and he was about to bump up her appointment to thirty seconds from now if his lips did anything more. She was certain she was a melting pot of hormones and pheromones at this point; and from the little he’d told her about his superior sensory capabilities, he knew just about all of that now.

“Right, should have guessed that,” she said, fighting to keep her voice steady. She felt his lips press softly to her collarbone, followed by a second higher than the first, and a third. His trail of tender kisses soon made the fireworks irrelevant, and as his lips reached her jaw she had no will to resist left, and she turned her head to capture his mouth with her own, a lingering sweetness of frosting on his lips. She reached her closest hand up to bury in his hair as she deepened the kiss, lips parting to pull the luscious bottom lip she caught herself daydreaming about half the day into her mouth. His tongue swept across their joined lips and she invited him in, vanilla and sugar complementing his natural taste.

This was exactly what she shouldn’t be allowing right now, as she knew how things could get out of hand in seconds, and she was still determined to respect his wishes, his timetable for this, whatever it may be. But he felt too good and she needed his touch, his taste… and he mimicked her earlier motion and lightly nibbled on her bottom lip until she hummed softly into his mouth and he quickly echoed the sound. Before she could refrain she was pressing her body back, seeking more of him. Instinctively he pushed forward against her at the new contact, his mouth breaking from hers as he breathed a sigh of relief, and she couldn’t help but catch her breath. His lips were at her throat as he listened to her out of control breathing, trailing sloppy kisses along her skin until he reached just below her ear he so enjoyed teasing her with in recent days. His teeth scraped at her skin as his tongue swirled over the sensitive spot before lightly sucking, not enough to leave a mark but enough to make her cry out. His hands moved to her hips to pull them snugly against his as he repeated this technique down to her shoulder.

Desperate to turn around, push him against the console to create friction or whatever she had to do to get some measure of relief, she squirmed around him but his hold on her was too tight and her strength was sapped by the wonders his tongue was working beneath her hairline now. She whispered his name instead, both approving what he was doing and spurring him on.

“Rose,” he breathed against her skin. “Thank you… for saving me… for the cake and… for being so patient…” the words hardly had time to escape between his desperate, lingering kisses. Her thoughts were dwindling to one as he went on, words of response lost on her tongue.
“I have… nothing more to hide…” he continued, and just as his hands trailed from her hips across her stomach, gliding just under her shirt so his fingertips could tease the sensitive skin just above her jeans, she finally realized what he was saying. Shivers coursed up her spine as he tested her, asked her permission.

“Doctor,” she whispered, willing herself to regain some cognitive control, but his mouth didn’t leave her skin.

“Doctor,” she repeated more clearly, fighting not to make it sound like a moan, tugging back on his hair with one hand. She turned to look at him as his head pulled away, his hands undisturbed.

“What are you sayin’?” she asked, hesitant but also thrilled by the possibility.

“I’m saying that, if you still want this…” he trailed off, his eyes dark with the promise of more, flitting from her lips to her eyes several times.

“‘Course I do,” she replied, voice shakier than her legs.

“Tell me what you want,” he whispered, low and rumbling in a way that made her knees buckle. It wasn’t arrogance, wasn’t a mind game, but genuine concern for her desires that flowed from his tongue, because he truly wasn’t sure, and she responded too quickly, unthinking. Her hands covered over both of his, ghosting over his skin as she answered.

“Touch me,” she repeated her plea from nights before, already too far gone as she allowed herself to consider he might finally be ready for this.

He was already working at the button on her jeans as he kissed her mouth again, gentle but insistent, and as her eyes closed her head was spinning with the soft touches of his lips and the thought of what his hands were now doing. It took every ounce of her willpower to stop his hands with one of hers, because she’d given him reassurance and she needed her own; his lips pulled away in puzzlement, eyebrows pulled together as he searched her face for explanation.

“Are you sure?” she panted, heart racing and desire climbing. “If you’re teasin’ me again, I swear…” she threatened, breathing erratically in her frantic need to hear his certainty, because she wouldn’t be able to stop if he changed his mind later; she could barely stop him now.

“Yes, I’m sure,” he said, without hesitation, eyes insisting his sincerity as they bored into her own for a long moment. He turned his head again to nuzzle his nose against her neck, breathing against her skin until she was shivering again, the reality of what he was promising hitting her with full force.

“No teasing,” he whispered in her ear, nipping softly at her earlobe as his hand slowly dragged down the zipper of her jeans as her muscles tensed in anticipation, lungs constricted as her breathing stopped altogether, until he dipped under the fabric of her knickers. He kissed her tenderly as two fingers slipped into her warm folds; the soft wet sounds coupled with the easy slide of his fingers told him she was already thoroughly aroused, bringing a deep groan from his throat. He grazed over her oversensitive center for just a moment, eliciting what would have been a loud cry if not muffled by his lips and tongue still covering hers. His fingers just skimmed her soft, wet flesh in a path down to circle her entrance, then back up to briefly tease that sensitive collection of nerves once more as her back arched involuntarily.

And at exactly that moment a vision came to life behind her closed lids. Susan, traveling with him in the TARDIS, when the Doctor took his first form, his face older, clothes less fitted and distinctly less pinstriped. His beautiful, intelligent granddaughter, the one he had only finally mentioned today. The Doctor’s thoughts grew dark, entering her mind as a pervasive fog as he contemplated her and any
other family members’ loss for a staggering moment. He quickly fought and gained control over the connection and transformed it to one bombarding her with loving sentiments (mixed with a handful of explicit thoughts).

He reminded her of their brief kiss in Rome after he’d resurrected her from her stone prison; the way he spun her around on the crowded street of 1950’s London, flooded with relief he’d saved her from Magpie’s monster; the way she made him laugh with nothing but joy and innocence and the warmth of the hugs they shared earlier that day. Rose was overwhelmed at the powerful combination of sensations; brought to the brink of tears by his fond recollection of a few of their small, innocent moments of the last few months. None of which were shallow or tainted by superficial desires; their relationship meant much more to him than that, he was assuring her, ironically, while his current ministrations were making her completely insatiable.

Her name was on his lips, breaking their kiss a finger slid inside her, a second joining shortly after. She grasped at the back of his thigh for support as her legs threatened to give out, her head falling back against his shoulder. This provided him too much of her exposed neck, and his teeth roughened his kisses in an unpredictable pattern over her tender skin that made her tremble against him as he still stroked inside her. Pleas and encouragements fell from her lips incoherently, the hand not clutching his leg reaching up to ruffle through his hair. At the loss of his touch inside her, she almost griped impatiently, but he focused his attention elsewhere, fingertips pressing soft, tight circles over somewhere even more sensitive.

Through thick clouds of lust and dizziness, she marveled that he seemed to know her pleasure points better than she knew them herself. At this rate she wouldn’t last another minute, and she stayed his hand with one of her own though her body implored her to let him finish as waves of heat radiated through her core.

His lips left her skin the same time his hand retreated slightly, but even as the swirl of overwhelming pleasure stopped with his caresses, she couldn’t help but be overcome with gratitude and respect for him. Without arguing, insisting, or grumbling he’d stopped when she made the slightest indication she wanted him to. This was going to be so very different than other blokes she’d been with.

“Doctor,” she strained, voice barely squeaking to audible. He waited for her to continue, and a wave of nervousness as he feared she was declining him suddenly washed over her. Quickly she encouraged him of quite the opposite, wordlessly squashing his doubt with her faith and desire, but she’d been too open, it was too powerful. The Doctor shuddered at the severity of her longing and his fingers came to life again as he buried a moan in her neck.

“Doctor,” she tried to say again, calmly, but it rolled from her tongue as a prayer, and he didn’t stop. With a few seconds of fighting to clear her head she tried again.

“I was just… gonna say… can we move someplace more comfortable?” the words finally choked their way out and the Doctor’s movements stopped again as he understood her original intent. She didn’t want her first time with him to be standing in the console, her legs about to collapse beneath her, but nonetheless she nearly cried as his digits slipped from her folds completely.

Both hands on her waist again, suddenly he was turning her, twirling her body around until her chest collapsed against his at the suddenness, the roughness of the urgent movement. She barely met his eyes for a moment before he was kissing her hard, pulling firmly on her waist until she felt him behind his trousers, her center throbbing at the feel of him rigid with need. The sounds of their erratic breathing between rough kisses, the echo of the TARDIS engines, even the slam of the front doors as the ship gave them more privacy were lost to their ears. They were caught up in their minds, in their slowly deepening connection that was humming with the exchange of love and lust, fears and
She might have thought something involving a bed, and he was bending to grip her thighs, lifting her feet off the ground as she quickly wrapped her legs around his waist. Without leaving her lips he was walking somewhere, but her sense of direction had been thoroughly purged. The clack of his shoes on the grating of the console disappeared at some point, and he stumbled and caught himself with an arm against the wall and she had to cling to his neck to keep from falling.

Too soon he was stumbling through a doorway and she knew the TARDIS had moved one of their rooms closer and she was endlessly grateful.

The Doctor hardly had to lean her back before she was settling onto the edge of a bed that wasn’t hers, and her heart galloped as her most ridiculous fantasies of the last year involving this bed were about to be realized. Blindly her fingers fumbled for a tie he wasn’t wearing before stroking down over the fabric of his suit to work open the buttons, because she couldn’t separate from his lips, couldn’t let go of the imminent indulgence he promised over and over, the comfort she found within him. Racing through her mind were dozens of latent desires, surfacing from deep corners of her imagination, and he missed none, frantically working to keep up as she unwittingly revealed herself.

Both of them struggled to pull off his coat, nearly tearing the seams when a particularly pleasant, recurring fantasy surged from her mind, one strictly involving the Doctor’s tongue. A deep hum of approval sounded from his throat and she cursed herself as his coat stubbornly clung to his arms, because she hadn’t wanted him to know about that particular thought. Her lips pulled away, his forehead resting against hers as he stood panting heavily and she was too, but her hands were dragging the coat down his arms until it finally crumpled to the floor. He was still as she continued, fingers curling around the hem of his polo to slowly reveal more of his skin and she was so thankful he’d ditched his ridiculous layers today. She grazed her fingertips along the sides of his chest and he caved, lifting his arms to finish the job, the deep blue fabric floating to the ground beside him.

Currents of desire coursed through her veins as her hands splayed across the bared skin of his chest, rapid double heartbeat beneath her palms, hairs tickling her fingers, trembling as they mapped out the contours they found across his stomach and around his waist. With a firm grip on his hips she tilted her head up to him, and as her hands tugged him in he leaned to briefly capture her lips as he made short work of slipping off her jacket. He pulled back only slightly, lifting her shirt slowly until her grip on his sides loosened as her arms raised so he could pull it over her head. His fingertips coursed over the searing skin of her stomach and she jumped, but the movement flowed into shivers, coursing through her down to her toes as the slow, lingering caresses of his hands continued over her chest. Her head fell back in content, and the Doctor’s lips were at her throat as his hands wound around her back, nipping playfully at her skin with his teeth between leisurely tastes of his tongue as he moved down her neck.

The slow torture of his kisses only paused as his fingers hooked into her already loosened jeans, his feet shuffling back only slightly as he tugged them down. Hands burying in his sheets to support herself, she lifted off the bed and she realized he’d captured her knickers too. As she stretched her legs out for him his fingers trailed along her skin as they chased the fabric to her ankles. He slipped off her shoes before slowly divesting her of both layers in one fluid movement.

He walked between her legs again, seeking her mouth and she only noticed the telepathy had stopped when his lips were on hers and it started again. And he was telling her how marvelous it felt to touch her skin as his hands wandered across her shoulders to her sides and down over her hips, sending warm chills up her spine and desire coiling deep within. Hinting at what he could make her feel before the night was over as his mouth drifted from her lips and hovered down to her collarbone. Whispering how beautiful she was as he kissed a trail down her chest and over her stomach, bending
slowly until his knees hit the floor. Promising she was going to enjoy what he had in store for her as his lips lingered just below her stomach. No words, just the overpowering senses he was so more skilled at communicating.

The Doctor was gentle and seductive and lovely like she’d never seen him, and experiencing just what he could do with his mouth been the stuff of her fantasies for months. The problem was in her mind, where she had always struggled to feel comfortable with this particular act, one in which the receiver was both completely vulnerable and powerless to the giver. Immediately detecting a falter in her consent, he looked up as his lips left her skin, seeking an explanation.

“Don’t you want in on this, too?” she whispered weakly, offering they could do something else that would gratify them both.

“I will be in on it,” he murmured, matching her volume though they had no audience, eyebrows pulling together in confusion. “Do you not want me to? I saw it, earlier…” He was right to be confused, because the vision had swirled through her mind only minutes before, and in theory she did want it, desperately.

“Yeah, ‘s just…” she wavered.

“Rose, tell me,” he breathed, eyes dark as they zeroed in on hers. She breathed in deeply, muscles in her legs she didn’t know were rigidly tensed beginning to relax around his arms, and she unclenched her conscious mind’s hold on her fears, opening herself fully to him again. Still contemplative, he accepted her worries and her self-consciousness. In the depths of their connection her fears became more tangible, more understandable even to herself – that he wouldn’t enjoy it like she would, that she didn’t taste right for him, that he’d be uncomfortable. Recurring issues that plagued her every time a bloke happened to be in the mood, which wasn’t often (which only fueled the fire behind her theories).

“Oh, Rose,” he whispered, turning his head to press a kiss to the inside of her thigh.

“I’m not like those blokes.” Another kiss, towards her knee.

“Remember what I told you the other day?” She mumbled an affirmative. “I’m going to enjoy it, too.” She had forgotten about that particular detail, and suddenly she clenched with desire.

“I’m perfectly comfortable… I’ve got you in my arms… this carpet is nice and soft…” he began to void each of her fears in turn, his words punctuated with his tender kisses to her thigh.

“All your skin is so lovely.” His mouth moved to her other leg, drawing a path in the opposite direction, lips inching ever closer.

“I want to taste you,” he whispered, hands tightening their hold. “I want to feel you.” Her eyes closed as she relaxed around him, his words finally sinking in as her self-consciousness began to fade, the Doctor’s reassurance and her profound trust in him erasing residual anxiety as he soothed her nerves, his tongue swiping over skin, teasing.

“Okay?” he breathed just over where she wanted him.

“Yeah,” she squeaked out, and when still he waited cautiously she urged him on again.

“Doctor, yes,” she pleaded, nodding fervently as nervousness turned to impatience, needing his mouth on her more than she needed to keep breathing.

Her hands clutched at his hair, fingers twisting through his mane as his tongue slid between her folds,
toes curling as the flat of his tongue smoothed a line from her entrance to his target, drawing out a cry of release from her lungs that she felt more than heard him return. His fingertips made little craters in her skin as his hands splayed out across her hips, endeavoring to touch as much of her soft skin as he could as her legs opened at his touch.

A blinding blast flashed from behind her lids, the last harrowing memory the Doctor had given her of what most plagued his mind, for the briefest moment, but it was enough. His lips halted as the anguished regrets coursed through them both, anger and pain. Fingertips massaging gently through his scalp, she retaliated against the wave, having expected it to happen again and even welcoming his openness, willing to handle anything if it meant she was connected to him in intimacy. Love and encouragement trickled through to him even through the rush of her arousal, strengthening his ability to regain control.

And he did.

_The two of them, on the couch, tasting each other for the first time, discovering how quickly their innocent touches could get out of hand and send her unprepared Doctor fleeing._

His tongue came to life again, teasing with the gentlest of pressure, sending tremors through her core and gasps from her lips.

_Cool, slender fingers enveloped her breasts as a trail of wet, hungry kisses trailed from her neck to her shoulder, and again, suddenly the Doctor was retreating._

Increasing the pressure just slightly, slow circles of his tongue brought his name to her lips as his hands shifted beneath her thighs, nudging her legs over his shoulders and she couldn’t be more vulnerable but she had no spare thought to notice.

_Attraction lights beamed behind them while a chilled ocean breeze swept over them, wrapped in each other’s embrace as passion took hold of their kiss… but on their arrival to privacy she was turned down._

The Doctor was reminding her of all the times he left her wanting, she realized too briefly before his tongue swirled over her _just right_ and it was like he _knew_ it was just right and he did it again, repeating the motion as his teeth latched on with the lightest bit of suction, and she was nearing the edge. She hadn’t adequate brain waves to consider why he’d be reminding her of those times, but she realized vaguely that he hadn’t planned this out. It was his intention to let her know he only wanted to make them up to her, every time he’d let her down, he was determined to make them up to her, and it was manifesting in the only way his mind could think of on the spot.

_Grudgingly she left her slumbering paradise in the throes of passion with the Doctor, waking to find him awkward and aroused and she accidentally convinced him and he was touching her, and there were clothes in the way but it didn’t matter because all she could feel was relief… but then, too, he disappointed._

Her heels were digging into his back, hands tugging on his roots while the sweet caresses of his tongue were coming harder, faster, unpredictable technique arching her back and drawing out a symphony of bliss from her lips.

She didn’t want it to be over so soon, she wanted to finish with him in every way but it was too late. She was too floored by the overwhelming reality that it really was her Doctor showering her with love, not a vivid hallucination playing itself out in the privacy of her room. The lingering tension from his memories was coiled in her stomach, his wordless, mellow reminder they could take as long as they wanted echoed through her, relaxed the last of her muscles, and she was gone.
Through the shivers of pleasure spreading through her limbs as he carried her through her peak with his tongue, enveloping her in a rapture of love through their ever-strengthening connection, she just registered clues. The Doctor’s hands clenching around her skin, arms shuddering as he held her, lips just vibrating with muffled sighs that mixed with her own as they savored her ecstasy. It was almost like he had… no, he couldn’t have.

She calmed around him and he pulled back to kisses along her thigh again, breathing heavily between lazy strokes of his tongue along her skin.

With a final ruffle of his hair and a sigh she let her legs fall from his shoulders, pushing against his forehead gently until he turned from his task and looked up, satisfaction and adoration in both his expression and their link as he still bristled with them.

“C’mon,” she smiled playfully, nudging him with a hand behind his neck. “Get up here.”

She scooted back and sprawled across his bed as he obeyed, standing to toe off his trainers before climbing onto the bed next to her.

Only when she was properly wrapped in his arms, tangled in his still detrimentally clothed legs, did she ask him.

“Doctor, did you, uhm…?” she whispered, fingers tracing a beeline over the hairs of his chest as she met his eyes.

His left eyebrow pulled up as he gave her a questioning smirk, but he didn’t lift his head from the pillow.

“You know…” She was already red with embarrassment, at a loss for a way to confirm her suspicions tactfully. He groaned as he rolled his head further into the pillow to hide his face.

“I couldn’t help it.” His words were muffled against the pillow, and she was ready to burst into flames again at the confirmation.

“Oh my god…” she leaned into him, quieting her chuckles against his neck.

“Don’t laugh!” he reprimanded as he came up for air, but he was chuckling, too, hands rubbing up and down her back for lack of a better way to alleviate his embarrassment. “I was wrong. You taste better than I ever dreamed. And it’s like I said, I could feel you. And it was brilliant.”

She pulled back to look at him, and he was smiling sheepishly, waiting for her reaction, bottom lip jutting out too much for her sanity.

“Well, I know. I was there,” she teased him, a hand tangling in his hair as he leaned into her touch. “Thank you. You were brilliant,” she said the words at the same time she sent a stronger demonstration of her appreciation straight from her mind, poking at his chest as her cheeks flushed at the memory. “But I think this time we can get a little more hands-on with you.”

He grinned warmly at the prospect, pulling her close to reunite their lips as they both sank into an even deeper intimacy.
Well, buckle yourselves in, because you're in for a whole lot of lovin'. (What did I even just say?) It's true though. I know it was tough to have this split up into two chapters, but I hope you'll forgive me and that it's worth the wait. I mean, how could I /not/ give you both perspectives here?

There are just a couple things I feel the need to introduce/explain my anxiety about (feel free to ignore or read this later):

1) that it's total melted-marshmallow-mushiness. Which it might feel like at times. But just know that I strongly believe the Doctor is completely head over heels for Rose and also has a different way of interpreting and analyzing the world than humans do. So, it's a very different tone than Rose would have. Also keep in mind that a lot of things the Doctor thinks/says in the heat of the moment are not things he would think and/or say during a normal day out in public. Definitely not. It's going to affect him in a similar way it would affect a human, though not as strong a degree. I decided to write it this way for several reasons, and if you want to know those you can message me on the tumblies if you'd like.

2) Hoping no one takes issue with the way I've addressed a certain (completely) non-canonical technicality. If you do, just let me know. I think it definitely falls within the realm of something he'd do though, what with his brilliance and medical expertise and whatnot. And the human version really /is/ in development and I think it's reasonable to say it'll be a thing within a few decades, if not centuries.

3) Telepathy is extremely complicated to write. Especially telepathic sexy times. Go easy on me.

As always, feedback is always welcome and ALWAYS appreciated. A lot. Hope you guys like it!

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Rose was everything around him, everything inside him. Nothing else could have captured his attention in that moment, not in the furthest reaches of the universe. She was all he could feel as they delved deeper, exhilarated by every new touch, all he could see when he opened his eyes to the staggering beauty of her soft, perfect curves. Freeing her breasts from the last of the clothing lingering on her skin, he hushed the groan that resonated in his chest as they filled his hands, his fingertips caressing softly over the tender flesh until her beautiful gasps escaped the air between their joined mouths. Ah, the loveliest sounds in the universe were formed from those lips.

Her taste still flooded his mind, the mingling flavors and aromas of heightened arousal, adoration and pleasure lingered, bolstered by the smaller doses she still imparted to him with her lips and tongue. Even as his lips moved from hers, across her neck or around the curves of her chest, she overwhelmed him, floral overtones from the soap she used, salt from a light layer of perspiration, a subtle sweetness like honey that was purely Rose.

Everything inside him was immersed, maybe even a little disoriented by the mixture of disbelief and freedom that he could finally have what he always dreamed with her, but that he always convinced himself he could never have. And without fear of himself, no less. His senses relished the scents and flavors and textures of her body as their link buzzed with excitement in the privacy of their minds, each of their long-hidden desires bared completely to the other as they teetered on the edge of
indulgence in each other’s arms once again.

She was finally his to explore, and slowly he was discovering every inch of her skin, memorizing the silky texture beneath his lips, taking special note when a brush of his fingertips made her shiver, marking spots where a swirl of his tongue made her whisper his name.

“Do we need… something?” she huffed, grudgingly parting their lips. Quickly he extricated her meaning from her thoughts and shook his head.

“No, we’re good… I’m on… no. Don’t worry,” he hardly explained anything through ragged breaths. He could explain his contraception later. She settled for later and nodded fervently.

And suddenly he was hers, too, as she rolled him onto his back, pouring more passion into her kiss as her hands coursed over the planes of his chest, tremors coursing through him at her touch. Her lips dipped down to his throat, coaxing a groan from his freed lips as her teeth nipped at his skin and her tongue soothed the marks. Content to yield control to her, his eyes drifted closed as she hovered over him, wet kisses teasing a path over his chest as exhalations of release and praise fell from his lips.

She had picked up on his trick, sending waves of desire and reassurance to him, silently promising him he was going to enjoy himself as her hands worked at his trousers, hands brushing his skin soothingly as they pushed the fabric down his legs, easily taking his pants with them. She radiated calm as she kissed a path back up his body, gently reminding him to relax his muscles as he tensed with anticipation, hearts racing and chest heaving. It’d been a long time. Such a long time.

Her mouth was reckless and needy on his as she descended on top of him, her breasts pressing onto his chest as her legs straddled him, and suddenly he was sliding through her warm, slick folds, hot and tingling shivers pulsing through his core. She continued to grind slowly against him as his hands gripped the bare skin of her waist, helping her to set a pace and an angle that made her glide across him perfectly for them both. It was slow, sensual, a satisfying tease of things to come, but it was driving them both desperate for release, aching hunger clouding their connection as they both savored the blissful torture until it became too much.

Gently he rolled them over, asking permission with his lips as he settled between her thighs, his hands groveling for as much of her skin as they could, sliding over her breasts to her arms, over her sides and the curve of her hips. Her arms came around his neck, her fingers digging into his hair as she welcome him in her mind, pleaded with her kisses. steadying himself with hands on the sheets beside her, he eased forward, savoring the way her cries mingled with his own as he brought them together. Rose surrounded him, hot and wet and exquisite, at the same time she bestowed him with bursts of her own pleasure, the swelling sensation of being filled. He trembled to his core at the intensity of the melding of their sensations, the insistent reminder of how much she cared for him, and it took him a few moments of whispering her name in reverence before he could move.

His rhythm began slow and gentle; everything he wanted in the universe was in his arms and his hearts were going to burst in his chest and he didn’t want to rush a second of this perfection. Memories and desires and dreams cycled between them, some of their most unforgettable experiences, until he couldn’t differentiate which thoughts were his and which were hers, but it didn’t matter.

*Before they ate greasy chips to recover from their second near-death experience, which she’d affectionately coined their first date, they had a little talk.*

“They’re all gone. I’m the only survivor. I’m left traveling on my own, ‘cause there’s no one else,” he opened up to his mysterious, beautiful new companion, trusting her instantly and somehow needing to tell her the truth. To tell her more about himself, and for her to accept him as he was.
“There’s me.” Oh, yes, there was Rose, stuck with a mad alien who tried to impress her by showing her the day her planet exploded in a fiery star. But she didn’t want to leave him. She just wanted chips. And he’d never be able to thank her enough for that. She called him a tightwad and he thought she was upset, but then there was the way she smiled at him, that made his stomach do backflips and his hearts race in his chest. He was falling for her hard.

Rose arched into him, meeting him on a deep thrust and he thanked her again, deeply so, as they both recalled one of their earliest memories, renewing the spark of excitement at the novelty of it all, the magnetism drawing them together though they were polar opposites, the electrifying combination of thrill and comfort surging through them both each time their fingers intertwined. Almost like their hands were made just for each other to hold... He considered how this body was basically designed for her, in the immediate aftermath of saving each other’s lives at the risk of their own, a pure demonstration of devotion if there ever was one, and couldn’t help thinking he was made for this connection, was perfect for it. That no one else could ever join with her like he could, could make her feel the way she felt about him, the way she felt now... The selfish thoughts still crept up on him and he couldn’t hold them back. But Rose agreed with him, calling out his name as her subconscious whispered he was the only one, that there would never be anyone else, as they spiraled higher together.

Locked in an abandoned hospital overrun by gas-masked zombies, waiting for a sketchy conman who may or may not rescue them, losing track of all the cares in the world as she offered out her hand for a dance. Maybe they didn’t really do much dancing until later, but the jealousy swirling in his gut over the dashing captain paired with the way her eyes captivated his in the dim lighting, seduced him so quickly and so thoroughly.

They danced in dim green of the console that night, all giggles and smiles and impulsiveness to ward off the competition, and seamlessly the memory transitioned to a more recent one… dancing closely intertwined on a pier at twilight, all unresolved tension and anxiety as they ravenously chased after one another, desire building between them even with strangers’ eyes on them. Desire he could do nothing about, not without teasing her.

But now he could, and heavens, she felt so immaculate, and he still felt he had to make it up to her even more. He picked up his pace slightly, cradling her with his hands just near her shoulder blades, but still his thrusts were smooth, controlled, like she was the most fragile thing in the universe because he wanted this to last forever. Rose’s legs came around his waist, her feet digging into his backside as her hands tangled in his hair, nails scratching his scalp to send delightful shivers down his spine that met with the ones radiating from where they were bound together.

“Well, Back to the TARDIS, same old life...” he explained nervously through a strangely peaceful snowfall of ash.

“On your own?” Rose tested the waters with this renovated Doctor.

“Why, don’t you want to come?”

Butterflies were filling Rose’s stomach, though she’d known this man for over a year, because this new Doctor looked younger, and my he was handsome, had a boyish charm that his previous self could not have managed. The Doctor’s hearts soared as she agreed to stay because it was rare anyone ever saw him change, and fear had gurgled in the pit of his stomach that she’d convince herself she didn’t know him anymore, didn’t trust him... But smiling as they held hands under the stars, they’d never felt so right.

Rose was begging him to move faster but he couldn’t bring himself to try to finish sooner because he couldn’t imagine feeling better than he already did. Nor could he take even the slightest risk of
roughness with her because he knew how many times he’d spoken too roughly to her or acted like
the cold, distant alien he was and this needed to be about showing her he could be different, that just
maybe he could be human for her. At least try, at least act like one… No. What was he thinking? He
could never be… He was haunted and hardened, but she was his salvation and his touchstone, and
for her, with her he was rescued from himself. He was harsh and stubborn but then he was also
delicate and so close to human sometimes, and everything inside him ached to be transformed, to be
everything she needed.

Steadying himself on the bed and showering her with soft kisses anywhere he could reach, one hand
reached between them, sensing a more direct touch was something else she craved. His fingers
nudged through light tresses of hair and between her folds as moisture trickled out to meet them, the
balls of his feet finding purchase in the mattress to steady his pace. Gasps of pleasure from her lips
gratified his ears as her enhanced rush of indulgence washed through him, mixing with his own so
brilliantly he swore he’d forgotten just how good a mutual climax could be. He started to brace
himself, remembering the sheer, impossible bliss of his first one, which, being purely mentally
stimulated, he was sure would be mild by comparison.

“You don’t know him. ‘Cause he’s not… I’m tellin’ you, he’s not… even if he was, how could I leave
him? All on his own, all the way down there? No, I’m gonna stay.” Rose’s heart sank as she
grappled with the possibility he might be dead, but even then her compassion and her loyalty didn’t
abandon her, and she didn’t abandon him.

“I’ll get back. Rose is up there.” It was the only thing he was certain of at the moment.

“If I believe in one thing, just one thing: I believe in her!” The sole purpose for the Doctor’s
continued existence seemed to be to cling to hope that Rose was still alive and could make it through
this: what may have been their most difficult trial yet.

Being separated had nearly killed them both, emotionally and physically, and their reunion led to
their shared comfort and later confessions and eventually, this moment…

It stung sharply to relive his memories and experience hers for the first time, because she had never
been too specific about what had happened with the others in his absence. But the dull ache of
previous pain contrasted so sweetly with the way they held each other now, skin against skin,
honesty and affection and long-awaited fulfillment pulsing between them. They couldn’t possibly be
any closer, mentally, physically, anything, and the scars of losing each other faded as her legs pulled
him in with each thrust, until they disappeared altogether.

Memories were diminishing from view as they were superseded by their present desires and
reassurances, and neither of them wanted it to end but they were driven by an urgent need to satisfy
each other, to taste their sighs, hear their names in the air. Their physical sensations continued to fuse
together, his fingertips guided by her pleasure to tracing rings around her sweetest mark, and she was
guided by his, lifting her hips to meet him at the just the right time and as on command he gifted her
the little noises she liked so much. It was a delicious paradox, to be welcomed and sheathed in the
warm embrace of her body while also experiencing himself gradually replace her longing with
fulfillment on every movement.

Her arms tightened around his neck to pull him ever closer as her muscles tensed beneath him, and
he was ascending with her, that lost Gallifreyan phrase swirling through his mind again while every
nerve in his body flared with their united senses. She urged him for speed again and he listened this
time, carrying them both past a point of slowing down. His lips couldn’t connect with hers with the
way they were moving so he settled for what he could reach, tasting and sucking on the arm to his
right as she clutched at his hair, absorbing all the flavors he could between his own exhalations.
His name flowed from her tongue like a plea, saturated the air and he answered with hers as they were undone together. She fluttered around him as he found his release with her, his arm shaking under his own weight as the shockwaves of pleasure started to radiate through him. He had just enough time to see her eyes close and features contort with pleasure before his eyelids surrendered as well, and it was just the two of them, soaring through a dark paradise together, sighs harmonizing as they floated on the waves of completion, two becoming one at last.

Like returning to Earth after a trip to a distant planet, a far removed time, he was slow to regain his senses and establish a sense of reality again. Ok, blankets, his bed, his room, the TARDIS, the love of his eleven lives… Blimey, he was in disbelief even then, his equilibrium spinning as he descended, gradually softening inside her.

Her large grin and sated expression greeted him as he opened his eyes, both of which he returned as he took in her immense beauty, the light glisten of perspiration making her skin and her curves positively glow. His hand slid out from between them as he lowered himself gently on top of her to capture her lips for a kiss, savoring the taste of her pleasure and their consummation and him on her tongue, consistent sounds of contentment vibrating from his lips. Every last molecule made his head swim and Rose was giggling internally at him, clearly not understanding just how delightful she tasted.

He slowly eased out of her as he rolled them gently to one side, kisses becoming slower, more languid as his head sunk into her pillow. She was the one to part them, whispering his name once more against his lips and a dazed, contented smile took over his lips as she pulled back to see his drooping eyelids. His hand lifted to cradle her face, thumb brushing over her cheek as they lay together, smiling as their breaths and heartbeats slowed to normal in their calming gaze and warm, caring thoughts that filled their link. Her arms shifted to wrap around his back as she leaned against him, both relaxing from mutual gratification, a hint of more latent desires just beginning to kindle in the depths of their minds. Ones they could deal with in a few minutes. For now he just wanted to hold her like this.

Still he simply couldn’t believe it. For once the universe was smiling down on him, giving him everything he could possibly have wanted with this very fantastic human. Not only did he get to share every bit of himself with her, finally shrugging off so much of the guilt and loneliness and anxiety that plagued him when she wasn’t in his presence, but they were able to connect physically, too… Well, he really had forgotten why humans love this so much. They made it fun. Yes, it was definitely better with a human than a Time Lord. Definitely.

“Well, thanks,” Rose broke their wordless silence, a blush on her cheeks.

Alright, maybe he still wasn’t quite accustomed to all his thoughts being uncensored around her. Didn’t mean it wasn’t completely, absolutely worth it.

“You’re welcome,” he smiled back, refusing to make the moment awkward. She stared into his eyes for a moment, eyebrows pulling together though her smile didn’t fade.

“This is weird,” she chuckled.

“What’s weird?” he asked, panicked. If they weren’t talking and could just communicate in their heads he wouldn’t have this problem. What was weird!?

“Not having to ask how you are. How it was for you, or, whatever. I already know.” Oh. Oh. Right. It wouldn’t have been like that with any other blokes. This wasn’t something he ever talked about with (very far in the) past partners.
“Yeah, suppose you do. Proud of yourself?” He smirked.

“Maybe a little. But it must be the same for you, yeah?”

“Mhm,” he nodded. “It’s nice, isn’t it? No lying. No faking it. And it makes it so much easier to learn what you like. I suppose, in a way, it’s like cheating.”

“Nah. ‘S better this way.”

“So you liked it then? Was it everything I said it would be?” he teased. He knew he hadn’t given her much to go off of. You couldn’t really adequately prepare someone for sex with someone telepathic as himself if they’d never experienced it before.

“Better.” And, ooh, he felt that, too. She wasn’t lying.

“Weeell,” he drawled, unable to keep the smugness from his face when he knew there was no way she could lie to him about it.

He still couldn’t believe it. The thought was striking him at regular intervals now, as he was too wrapped up in her for it to actually occur to him in the midst of it.

Neither can I, she agreed with him without speaking this time. D’you remember… Rose chuckled out loud but she couldn’t finish her thought before the memories were coming back.

“When you say ‘companion,’ is this a sexual relationship?” a copper had asked them after he dropped Rose off twelve months too late.

“No!” they’d both insisted, looking to each other for confirmation they felt no physical attraction before shaking their heads. Which was an outright lie, on his part. Though, he wasn’t lying about the no-sex bit. He certainly had never intended that with her all that time ago…

“M sorry. I dunno why I brought that up,” she chuckled, clearly not too sorry about it.

“Well, technically, you didn’t bring it up. Not intentionally.”

“Still, dunno what made me think of it.”

“What is it – did I not charm you right from the start? I was certainly trying to, what with all the leather and the jiggery-pokery.” He gestured to thin air, trying to indicate almost everything his previous body did was to impress her.

Rose was laughing in earnest now, probably more due to post-coital delirium than anything else, muffling her chuckles into his shoulder as her body shook with them. It was impossible not to return the infectious giggles and he was laughing too, more from irony and shock than anything else. The same irony and shock she was feeling, it seemed. It was a bit incredible, how much their relationship had changed since that day. Or, even in the last few weeks. If he could somehow talk to his previous incarnation, he’d have never been able to convince himself to believe one day in the next couple years he’d be shagging Rose Tyler.

“’s not that,” she defended herself against his rapid internal ponderings, the laughter dying down.

“That’s not why I’m laughin’. I dunno… ‘s just… funny I guess. Ironic. Think I always was sort of interested though. Well, maybe not right away, but, I was before you changed, y’know.”

“You were?” He could hardly believe the words coming out of her mouth.
“Well, believe ‘em,” she answered his thoughts again, voice low and tempting him again as she reunited their lips.

“Looks like it’s just you and me.”

“Yeah.”

“Good.” He took her hand with a grin as the lift doors closed, and she was thinking about the way he took her hand and the fluttering in her stomach as he smiled, thinking about the possibility of more. She was checking him out.

“G’night, Rose,” he’d bid her adieu for the night as he kissed her on the forehead, just after their escapades in the London blitz with nanogenes and gas-masked civilians, Jack somewhere unseen aboard the ship, having taken the hint that the Doctor didn’t share. And as she walked from the console in just her pajamas and slippers, her fingers were on her lips as she considered what it might be like if he kissed her there instead. What it might feel like to kiss a Time Lord, for his large, calloused hands to hold her face while he sloughed off his roughness and showed her that gentle side again, the one she only confirmed existed when they danced earlier. Maybe it was better than kissing a human bloke…

He pulled away with a gasp.

“You were!” His eyes were wide and it was a little shock but mostly unchecked satisfaction with himself that streamed to her through his brilliant smile.

“Told you,” she shrugged, apparently not bothered by his sudden burst of pride.

“And here I thought you only liked me for my body,” he glanced down at his exposed form, all wiry muscles and hard edges, and started to question whether he should follow this train of thought if he didn’t want her to change her mind about everything and walk out of here.

“D’you really think ‘m that shallow?” she asked, and his gaze lifted back to her face but she hadn’t noticed she had copied him: her eyes were still scanning from his feet to his chest in what genuinely seemed like approval. Regardless, it made her question ironic at best.

“Well, you are staring,” he pointed out, unsure if she extended the viewing for his benefit or hers.

She didn’t acknowledge or deny the accusation, merely tore her eyes from his body back into his eyes, an innocent smile negated by the bit of tongue poking out from between her teeth at the corner of her lips.

“Although, I do like this body, too.”

She didn’t need words after that. It truly amazed him how quickly she’d learned to get her point across without them. Her fingers combed through his hair, nails trailing a path along his scalp and his eyelids fluttered closed with a contented groan. She liked his hair. With a final tease of his mane her fingertips brushed along his cheek to his mouth, tracing along the seam of his lips until he smiled into her touch. She liked his lips. He pressed a light kiss to her fingertips before she could pull her hand away, and he knew she smiled back.

Her hands found both of his, which were still stubbornly attached to her body, and reluctantly tugged
them away from her skin. She lined up their palms and their fingertips together before twining their fingers together, thumbs stroking over his index fingers. She liked his hands. When they were in hers. When they held her. Touched her. He hummed softly as he considered that for a moment. Oh, that was good. He was good, he had to admit. Letting her fingers slip from his, her palms landed on his chest, pushing back until he rolled onto his back for her, compliant to let her do basically anything she wanted. Her touches were slow, curious as she mapped out all the bits of him she liked, swirling her fingers through the hairs on his chest, trailing a path down his stomach. She liked that he was slim and foxy. He would have rolled his eyes if they were opened, but he knew she wasn’t teasing him with sarcasm this time, she really did like their height difference, the thinness of his frame and the lean ridges as she stroked along his side, down his waist and over his hip and across his thigh until…

He jumped with a little gasp, eyelids flashing open as her fingers closed around him, and blimey, the visual was even more incredible. He might have been embarrassed at how quickly he was standing at arms again, so to speak, if he could think of anything except the gorgeous sight and gorgeous feeling as Rose’s hand started to stroke him, slow and teasing. She liked this bit, too. Before he could lift his head for a better view, she was kissing him, such a delicious combination, climbing halfway onto his chest to prevent him from moving as her hand picked up speed. He didn’t want her to have to be taking care of him again so soon but she told him to shut it from in their heads and he did, settling on humming his thanks against her lips instead.

But, damn it all, his thoughts got away from him again. Like he didn’t already get enough. Like he wasn’t already having the most wonderful night of this regeneration, and probably a lot of others. The smooth caress of her hand and the lovely, warm taste of her lips and her tongue got confused in his mind and before he could control himself he was musing on the sheer perfection it would be if her mouth replaced her hand. Her lips became stationary against his at the same moment he was deprived of her touch, and he almost grumbled at the loss of both and could smack himself for having lost so much self-control.

“Rose,” he breathed, giving himself just enough room for the words to escape. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to – to think of – I mean, I was fine with what you were – ”

“Doctor, ’s fine. Don’t you remember when this same exact thing happened to me? Y’can’t help it. Actually, ’s better this way, me not having to guess exactly what you want.”

“Uhm,” he gulped and was suddenly nervous as can be because he could already see what she was planning, and she was just smiling at him with such a devious little smirk on her lips. Why was he so nervous, after what they’d already done? He allowed briefly that maybe he didn’t want to soil something as pristine as Rose Tyler’s lips for his own hedonistic purposes. But it was an errant thought, replaced quickly by the realization she was just trying to make their experience as mutual as possible. And she may have used an irritatingly logical argument that he was being a hypocrite. And he should probably take the same advice he gave her not an hour ago, which he should. But as she started to climb down his body with a trail of hot, wet kisses along his abdomen he was second guessing it again as he shivered beneath her, of nervousness or excitement, maybe a little of both.

“Really, you don’t have to – ” The rest of his sentence was lost to a deep groan as her mouth closed around him, warm and wet and so lovely.

“Oh, Rose, that’s – that’s… brilliant.” She chuckled with satisfaction around him because, god, he was thick, she already knew how brilliant it was. Still, why not emphasize it out loud, anyway. Propping himself on his elbows to see her properly, his hands were fistling in the sheets as she tugged on him with a particularly fantastic maneuver of her tongue. It took all his strength not to rock his hips up in his search for more or for swift Gallifreyan curses to roll off his tongue. He bit his lip
while he clutched at the fabric in his hands, and as much as he wanted to watch himself disappear between her lips, to watch her head move up and down as she drove him to the edge, his eyes floated closed out of sheer amazement.

He was being selfish, so selfish, but he was thinking of when he tasted her and brought her to her own release, overwhelmed by her flavors bursting on his tongue. He just loved tasting everything, he’d put anything in his mouth, and the best thing he’d ever tasted was Rose and he just hoped to whatever deity may exist she was getting even a fraction of that gratification when… Ohh, yes. She did like it, radiating from her was approval of his taste and just being glad she could feel him, be guided through her movements by his enjoyment. Quickly she learned when swirls of her tongue made him squirm beneath her, how a little bit of suction at the right time could make him so noisy she smiled even while continuing her magic, that he’d say her name whenever she wanted if she only grazed him with her teeth on a downward stroke.

She pulled at the loose threads of his restraint with her tongue, taking him deeper into her mouth and he was slipping, from control and his mind and from the entire universe. All it took was her gentle reminder not to hold back and just let himself feel and that was it, heat and shudders rippled through him as he finished on her tongue, writhing on the mattress with cries of her name. It wasn’t until his elbows crumpled under his weight and he fell back onto his pillow, drained and gasping with the residual tingling throughout his body, that he realized he’d heard her softly crying out around him as her hand clamped just a little tighter at the base of his length, and he beamed up at the ceiling even in his haze.

Her lips didn’t retreat until he was flaccid in her mouth, overcome with giggles as she scooted up next to him again, collapsing into his arms for a lazy, sloppy kiss in their sated exhaustion. He didn’t imagine liking the taste of himself on her lips but, as she tended to do, she surprised him by making even that seem delectable.

“Well, I dunno about ‘delectable,’” she teased as they broke from the kiss in favor of holding each other tighter as they caught their breath. “But it was… different. ‘s like… sweeter than human blokes. But that reminds me, is that why we’re safe? Is it too different? I mean, are we not… compatible, or something?” She pulled back enough to look at him, curious about his answer.

“Ohh, right. No, it’s not that. In a few decades’ time humans finally come up with male birth control… it was fairly simple to recreate the basic formula modified for my DNA and physiology. Basically works the same way though. Just (he clicked his tongue with a fake cut of his hand across his throat) nixes the motility. They don’t really make the stuff back home, they don’t, well, have the same attitudes about sex and reproduction. But anyway, I’ve used it before and, uhm… I started on it again a few days ago, after we talked, just in case, uhm…”

“The right time came along?” she asked, sensing his discomfort and skipping right over the potential awkwardness that he’d half-planned this out. Which he didn’t, really, he just wanted to take all the precautions. After that talk in the kitchen, well, he felt any day could be the one he felt ready enough for this. And he supposed he was right.

“Yeah,” he conceded the simpler explanation, thankful for the interruption.

“So ‘s a pill, then?” He chuckled slightly.

“No. Once a month intravenous.”

“Oh,” she acknowledged simply. “Well, that’s nice of you. Usually ‘s always the woman’s got to take care of that.”
“Weell, it’s cause I’m so sweet,” he teased back, and he couldn’t believe how ludicrous he sounded but it didn’t stop him. It must’ve been Rose’s hormones getting to him.

“Even the Absorbaloff thought so,” she played along and had him laughing again. “In more ways than one, I guess,” she added, a playful smile on her lips.

“No, it’s true though. There aren’t really any more monosaccharides in my, ehm… well… but it doesn’t have the same basic amines that humans produce. Some of them are actually the same compounds associated with decaying meat… but anyway, without that source of bitterness I suppose it would taste better. But those compounds must have evolved for some purpose, which I doubt was to make it taste worse – ” She silenced the ceaseless flow of physiological facts and musings with a finger over his open mouth.

“Doctor, you really never know when to shut it, do you?” He shook his head innocently as he met her eyes, his lips pressing shut beneath her finger. “Just take the compliment and be happy.” He nodded until she lifted her finger to kiss him again, amused rather than turned off by his incessant gob even then.

Even with sex to compare it to now, there was something so lovely about kissing Rose Tyler he’d always be glad to come back to it, to relax in her embrace and just relish the sensation of her soft, full lips brushing against his own. It was soothing in the same way it was absolutely maddening; before he could touch her and hold her like this kissing her made him insane on more than one occasion. But in the aftermath of loving her, when his hands were splayed across only skin and her naked form pressed into his own, easily melding together again in their warm embrace, it was calming. Very calming. It might have been three minutes or three hours they kissed, he couldn’t rely on his internal clock when she’d turned his brain to useless mush. But slowly their deep passion faded to soft, light pecks until their mouths finally parted, their sighs of contentment in sync as her head rested in the crook of his neck, huddling ever closer.

After a few minutes of mumbling satisfaction to each other he thought she might be falling asleep, but he realized she was far from it.

“’s really weird, gettin’ off without you ever touchin’ me.”

“Oi!” he defended himself and his telepathic tendencies with a pang of offense. “It’s not weird, it’s – ”

“Okay, okay, sorry, weird’s not what I meant,” she lifted her head to look at him again, and must have seen the mild distress already forming in his features. Sure, maybe it was a little startling at first, but…

“Doctor, I loved it, y’know I did,” she reassured him, rubbing circles into his back. “I just didn’t know that it could happen with me, too, I thought maybe it would just be you, since… I dunno. Your mind’s stronger than mine.”

“Well, I did tell you a few days ago. Sort of.”

“Yeah, I know, I just thought… I dunno. I didn’t know it could go that far,” she trailed off suggestively.

“Rose, it’s a very mental thing, a climax. Your head’s got to be in the right place if the physical stimuli are gonna do anything. With telepathy, it’s like, in a way, you are getting both, though, because you’re a part of everything I can feel. So really it makes perfect sense. Well, maybe, from a strictly biological viewpoint perhaps a scientist would say that you didn’t actually – ”
“Doctor, you’re ramblin’ again,” she chuckled.

“Well, you made me nervous!” And it was the truth.

“I didn’t mean to. I wouldn’t change it for the world, honest. ‘S just so different. In a good way. A very good way.” Ooh, he could feel that, as soon as he tapped into her emotions again, confirming what she was saying, that she did like it, every last bit of it. Of course she did. Why did he ever doubt her?

“Doctor, ‘m curious,” she said, changing the subject. “When’s the first time you thought about doin’ this?” His eyes widened in panic as he struggled to shut down the ten thousand times he’d fantasized about shagging his traveling partner in the last year before she could see them. Thankfully, most of the ones buzzing through his head in an instant were the most recent (and most powerful).

“Oh, c’mon, just tell me. I’ll tell you mine,” she pleaded with a flutter of her eyelashes and, like it was that easy to persuade him, he yielded.

“Oh, alright,” he conceded with a groan.

Without having to speak again they established in the next few minutes the Doctor won most of the contests, with wanting to kiss her since Downing Street, having ethereal, unformed ideas of making her his own somehow since they met their first Dalek, and getting pangs of jealousy over her sort-of-boyfriend-for-a-few-days after Satellite Five and later with Jack. But, to his surprise, he and Rose actually shared the exact timing of their first explicit musings on what their first intimate encounter might be like, if they ever had one. Their second ‘first’ night in the TARDIS together, just after she’d saved his new body and they’d saved Christmas from the Sycorax together. Rose was… charmed. Unexpectedly charmed, with the knowledge that beside her was the same inspiring and wonderful man she’d traveled with, and the new, unfamiliar attraction she had to him, his youthful expression and contagious energy. And his new body was so different, more vulnerable to human things like attraction and lust and he could feel it was more physical, more easily stimulated by touch than his previous form, calloused by violence. He had to admit, he was thankful it was a tie on that particular round, because he’d have felt like an alien pervert if he’d won that one, too.

“There, you satisfied?” he asked.

“Yeah, I am. ‘S nice to know I wasn’t the only one lookin’ that night.”

“Hmm,” he chuckled lightly as he pulled her closer at the vivid memory of her being both madly desirable and completely off-limits at the same time.

But without any warning, another of their little moments was crumbled by his cursed mind as a flashback of the vision he’d seen behind the fireworks earlier that evening assaulted him again. And Rose, by extension. Like before, it was just a formless void, promising dark times in their future, shapeless threats and shadowy fears that chilled her to the bone even more than it had frightened him.

“Doctor,” she gasped before swallowing hard. “What was that?” He sighed heavily. This was the last thing he wanted her to have to see tonight, when they’d gone so long without any negativity.

“I’m sorry,” he said, squeezing his eyes shut with one hand. “It’s…” he struggled to find words to explain the storm-like premonitions he was known to have from time to time, opting to explain without them. He clarified it was the same thing that had caused him concern from the road as they looked into the sky, and she understood, though with a heavy heart. He explained, too, that he didn’t know what it would be any more than she did, and only lamented the fact that now she was now well acquainted with the terror that it had struck him with.
“Doctor, `s gonna be alright, yeah? We’ll handle it together, whatever it is.” He didn’t answer, and he hadn’t even realized he was thinking of that fear again, the heaviest one at the bottom of his growing stack that made him tremble, until she pointed it out.

“I can feel that, y’know. And `m not. I’m not leavin’ you.” He nodded unenthusiastically. Of course she could feel it, it was his absolute worst fear and he wasn’t sure how something that loomed so frightening could be worse than that, than losing her. The universe could threaten him with a lot of things, but none that caused him quite as much fear as the dreadful and unavoidable certainty of losing Rose.

“Doctor, stop it, I said `m not goin’, now stop – ” a crack of her voice stopped her argument as he saw the moisture threaten to spill from the corners of her eyes. Well, that simply wouldn’t do.

“I know. I’m sorry.” It was all he could say, but his emotions didn’t match the words and she knew it.

“Just hold me,” she said, curling into him, and his arms wrapped around her obediently, cradling her against his chest as they tried to offer reassurance to one another in the quiet of their minds.

But they could both feel it wasn’t enough; the need to be closer again was escalating, consuming them from within.

Rose was the one to wriggle out of his hold, seeking comfort in his lips, her hands tangling in his hair as her mouth collided desperately with his, her lips drawn to tease them with delicate circles while hers ghosted down his spine to his lower back and made him shiver. Spent their mental efforts trying to alleviate distress and worry as their hips started to grind together, infusing their kiss with soft moans when friction brushed them in the right spots.

She was taking charge then, pushing him back onto the bed as she rolled on top of him, legs landing on either side of his waist as her lips wandered from his to travel down his neck. Her tongue darted out to taste him between nips of her teeth as her lips drew a path from his chin down his throat then across his collarbone to his shoulder, pausing to latch onto the base of his neck and suck roughly on his skin until he was groaning out her name, his hands roving frantically over her body, unable to decide on a place to rest.

“Please,” he begged with her name again, his hips rocking off the bed as his self-control dissolved to nothing once again. She took pity on him, deserting the now dark spot on his neck to sink down onto him, binding them together as they whimpered in relief.

It was different, making love their second time. She was rougher, faster, more insistent. Both of them were louder and less restrained. But he loved this, too. Lingering fears in both their minds drove them forward more urgently than the first time, eager for a distraction from the lurking images, a solace from unexpected anxiety. Losing themselves more in the physical sensations this time, they only intermittently sent waves of comforting thoughts to one another, gratified enough for the time being with satisfying carnal desires. They were an outlet for her worries and he didn’t mind in the least if she took it all out on him. It was marvelous.

He didn’t even remember if it was out loud or not but she was asking for his hand as they neared the edge and it was so much easier to offer it in this position. With two of his fingers he helped them along, brushing over that sensitive bud with his fingertips again and again as she moved over him and she took him in deeper as he started to meet her on each thrust. He was nearly certain she didn’t tell him she loved him out loud, but from within the boundaries of their connection, and immediately he answered in Gallifreyan, clear as crystal. So it mustn’t have been out loud or they couldn’t have
heard over their cries, and they were almost there, just a few more rocks of his hips and…

Even knowing what to expect it was overwhelming, blinding them (Rose was literally seeing stars) as they climbed over their peak together, their names sounding through the air. They lost track of the divide between their bodies but it didn’t matter, they shared the paradise and willed themselves to be tied together permanently so they’d never have to part again. Neither of them slowed until they were shuddering from overstimulation, too sensitive to feel any more, and Rose fell forward onto his chest, her hands squirming under him to grip his shoulders tightly. His arms pulled her closer as her chest heaved to catch her breath, and his breathing was labored too but he knew it was easier for him, respiratory bypass having partially helped him along the way.

He squeezed her against him, kissing the top of her head every few seconds as her body slowly stilled around him and he softened inside her. He surely wasn’t going to be the one to separate them this time. Did they really have to?

Rose laughed, regaining her senses.

“I dunno. Maybe we can stay like this forever,” she mused.

“Brilliant. Sounds like a plan.” He was being ridiculous, but at least she was being ridiculous with him.

“Just one problem,” she said, lifting her head off his chest to look at him.

“What’s that, then?”

“I don’t think ‘m tall enough to kiss you without movin’ closer.” She was right: the height difference was not going to let them. Not kissing wouldn’t do, either. Well, it was nice while it lasted, anyway.

“Alright, c’mon, then,” he said, his hands finding her waist to pull her closer and though they griped at the loss of being intimately bonded, they were appeased as soon as their lips united again.

Rose was tired, really tired this time. As he rolled her off of him and back to her side, her fatigued muscles could hardly hold onto him as they savored the peaceful aftermath of another climax, thoughts much calmer and qualms hardly tugging at the backs of their minds as they soothed the roughness of their second shared encounter with tender kisses. In just a few minutes she was hardly reciprocating, strength waning from the combination of the busy day and the emotional rollercoaster of telepathy he’d taken her on, and oh, probably more than anything, the slurry of sleep-inducing hormones from having four orgasms.

“Doctor,” she mumbled just as he retreated to his own pillow and started to rub her head.

“Yeah?”

“Will you stay the whole night?” she whispered, eyes not even bothering to open.

“Course I will.” With a weak smile but a much more powerful wave of happiness from her mind, he returned to massaging her head, and she was asleep in only minutes with his fingers coursing through her hair.

He couldn’t sleep. At least, not right away. Out of the reaches of her inquisitive mind, he could truly lay back and take in the wonders of her beauty, admire every curve, memorize the shape of her breasts, commit all the hues of her skin, from her chest to her toes, to memory. She was so, so lovely. And though he’d never ogle at her like this when she was awake, he couldn’t tear his eyes away long enough to consider sleeping for a solid hour.
And then, he might have gone into a little bit of shock for a few minutes after that as it really hit him what they’d just done together and how beautiful and perfect and beyond his wildest dreams it was. And that she told him she loved him. Did she remember doing that? Sometimes humans said these things in the middle of heated moments without intending to. He already knew she loved him; it was as obvious as that he loved her ever since she’d opened her mind to him, difficult as it was for him to believe. But still, hearing it confessed plainly from her thoughts was another thing entirely. He pondered briefly what it would be like to hear it aloud, those three words crisp on the air as they cascaded from her lovely tongue and her perfect lips… But it wouldn’t be fair to expect it. Not when he wasn’t prepared to say it out loud, either.

He did everything in his power to shove that irritating premonition out of his mind, the bugger that almost made Rose cry during such a valuable, intimate night, arguably the best night of their time together, or at least one of the best. But it was there, waiting to make itself known more clearly, though its strength was diminished by their passion. He just wanted to forget about it, to fall asleep next to Rose now and wake up in the morning with no recollection of it, to only remember their brilliant night and have a fantastic day at the games and definitely do this again tomorrow night.

Wresting control of his conscious mind completely, he shoved the ghostly, ominous threat into his subconscious for the evening as he settled deeper into the sheets. Wrapping an arm around Rose and pulling his brown quilt up over them, he allowed himself to drift off in peaceful contentment with her, determined to keep his promise.
“Doctor, d’you realize we still haven’t actually made it to Greece?” Rose reminded the Doctor as he linked their arms the moment they stepped out of the TARDIS the following morning.

“Hmm, suppose you’re right,” he agreed, raising his eyebrows slightly. “And it was only supposed to be a quick detour…” he recalled his exact words from when the trip was derailed in the first place.

“That where you want to go next, then?” he asked, nudging her ribs lightly as he stole a glance at her.

“I dunno. I do want to go, of course, but, well…” There was one trip she’d been meaning to ask about but had never had the chance.

“What is it?” he asked, suddenly endlessly curious about whatever was going on in her mind that she wouldn’t tell him straight away. His inaction and the curiosity in his expression confused her, to say the least.

“What? ‘S not like you can’t just pull it right out of my head anyway, right? Surprised you haven’t already,” she mused. Given all that they had seen and heard from each other the night before, she was expecting essentially no boundaries whenever they had any form of physical contact. Had prepared for it, even, in the last privacy she thought she might have of the morning in her spacious bathroom. (The Doctor had, unexpectedly, asked her to join him in his but she declined with the excuse that all her belongings were still in hers, even though she knew the TARDIS could move them in two seconds. Somehow she felt she needed a few minutes to herself, for the very reason she was bringing up now).

“Oi,” he said defensively, his brow furrowing immediately like she’d somehow attacked him with the statement. They’d both stopped walking and she turned to him, eyes narrowing as she watched his expression soften until he could speak again, anxious to hear what he’d taken offense to. The streets were crowded with cars and pedestrians, residents and tourists alike wandering through the city, but neither of them could be bothered they might be in the way.

“I’ve never just ‘pulled anything right out of your head,’ have I?” he asked, desperate for the answer to be negative, but he didn’t wait for her to give it. “I always ask. Or, at least, I always warn you before I go snooping around, or vice versa.” She wanted to believe him, but it was impossible to hide anything from him the night before, and she knew the same had been true for him, or that it certainly seemed like it. There were definitely a few things she’d have liked to have kept to herself, not that she regretted anything in the least. She’d easily decided it was worth it when they’d hardly started.
“But, last night –” she started to explain, but the Doctor interrupted, suddenly lit up with new understanding.

“Oh, no, no, you don’t think it’ll be like that all the time?” he asked.

“Well…” She was at a loss for words, her face contorting in confusion. And just when she thought she’d gotten a grip on all the facets of his uniqueness as a lover.

“Ah, I see,” he acknowledged her answer from her expression. “Ok, well, think about any time before yesterday. I didn’t just come prowling in, did I? And before you, ask, no, you never did with me, either.” She considered for a short moment.

“No, you didn’t,” she decided firmly. “But, I didn’t mean to accuse you of that, ’m not saying I’m not okay with it,” she reassured him, hoping she hadn’t offended him about his telepathic ways unintentionally again.

“I’m not offended, it’s – it’s perfectly natural to need space to yourself. The way it feels, normally, I mean, it’s like… someone’s knocking on a door and you’ve got to let them in before they can see inside.” It was an alright analogy, she supposed, because there was a sense that he needed her consent every time he opened up their link. But it wasn’t ever so clear-cut, having tangible moments like a fist pounding on a door or swinging it by the hinges to allow in a guest. It was more subtle, less abrupt than that. And the last few times she’d hardly noticed she consented it all; it was more like her subconscious had given him the green light even when her conscious mind was unavailable.

“Sort of, yeah,” she conceded, understanding the point he was getting at.

“But the thing is,” he went on, slowly, explaining personal details with the same serious demeanor he’d explain a calculus proof. “If I get too excited, it’s completely different. It’s not really an option anymore, so I can’t really wait for your answer. I’m hard-wired to automatically connect with anyone while I’m –” He paused.

“In bed?” she ventured. He scowled a little at her cheapening of their experience but nodded regardless. It’s not like she meant to do that. She just knew for some reason he struggled to label anything related to sex and didn’t want to watch him stumble over his words again.

“And then it’s not like knocking anymore, it’s like crashing through the entire front wall with a bulldozer. For both parties involved.”

“Well, that just sounds terrifyin’,” she laughed. “But it wasn’t. I was expectin’ it, sort of. Well, I was expectin’ something different, ‘cause of what you told me, and I worked some of it out on my own.” She smiled, pleased with herself. “But I dunno, I guess I thought that once we’d ‘broken down the front wall’ there’d be no going back from it,” she explained, air quoting his earlier words.

“Oh, no.” He shook his head with certainty. “Doesn’t work like that. I mean, if you wanted to, I suppose we could keep it open all the time…” he stopped to watch her attentively, looking for any sign that it was what she wanted.

“Uhm, I think it’s – uhm – fine this way. I’m okay with time alone in my head.” She cringed a little, hoping he wasn’t secretly hoping for her to say yes.

“I figured that.” He smiled, not visibly troubled by her answer. “So, whenever you’re ready, we can do it again. No need to rush it.” My, he was wonderful and patient and just not alien after a shag. It really put him in a good mood. An honest one. And this is exactly why I’m glad he’s not listenin’ in right now, she thought.
“So, where is it you want to go?” he asked, just as they calmly stepped out of the way of a couple of skateboards and their too-young, too-obnoxious riders. Better not give them more attention than they deserve, anyway.

“Well my friends and I, we used to go to this amusement park –”

“Ohhh, I know just the place,” the Doctor interrupted, smiling to himself with satisfaction.

“Y’didn’t even let me finish!” Rose reprimanded him, bumping him with her shoulder.

“Well, it’s the best theme park in the universe, as voted by citizens of the universe ten-thousand years in a row, basically the entirety of the park’s existence. It’s got its own planet, it’s brilliant! And it won’t even be created until fifty thousand years from now,” he started to zone out in awe of the mystery amusement planet in the confines of his mind.

“But anyway,” he snapped out of his trance, “was that what you were getting at?”

“Basically, yeah,” she admitted with a sigh. She hated when he was right and solved their problems and dilemmas too quickly. She liked being a part of the decision-making. And yet, she trusted his judgment enough that she doubted there would be a better place to get rides and entertainment if the Doctor thought it was the best venue in the universe. Though, they did sometimes differ on matters of opinion, especially where the idea of ‘fun’ was involved.

“Great, it’s settled.” His words were garbled by a mouthful of something, and she turned to see somehow he’d acquired a small bag of popcorn and was stuffing another handful into his mouth.

“Where’d you even get that?” Her question was colored with a mixture of confusion and amazement. He really would put anything in his mouth, as she remembered him silently and unwittingly confessing the night before.

“Some bloke was handing ‘em out back there,” he managed to say between bites, poking his thumb behind them. She didn’t remember any bloke, nor see him pick it up.

“Doctor, people don’t just – just – hand out free food! What if it’s poisoned or… something?”

“It’s not,” he said with another squeaky crunch. “I’d be able to tell with my super-senses,” he teased. With a buttery smile, he offered her the small, half-empty, greasy paper container printed with their flag design. She reached in for a handful but didn’t take the bag.

She’d been half worried that his cheerful mood from the previous day would have faded after they’d had their fill, but she was being proven wrong more and more as they walked on towards the arena. The same playful banter and excessive physical contact persisted, and with his near-constant toothy grin and endless stream of excited conversation about the games, it was impossible not to join him in his excitement. The worries of what the day would bring – whether he would take them a step back, or regret anything he’d said only on accident, or try and close her off out of recurring fears or the nightmarish vision she’d seen – all disintegrated as they took their completely fabricated seats only granted to them by the psychic paper.

Of course, they couldn’t stay in one place too long, so every time they ventured outside for food or to the loo or for a walking excursion through town (they both got restless easily), they’d have access to a new event with completely new seats. It was all they needed, after all: just a brief taste of all the skills the Olympics had to offer, a glimpse at the capabilities of the human race without the boredom that would come with technicalities and scoreboards and watching the same event twenty times.

Still, another persistent worry stalked the furthest corners of her mind: that the Doctor wouldn’t want
her in his room again that night. That he would want even more space than he let on after what happened, or that he’d change his mind after having his mind to himself for an entire day, time enough to bring old doubts to the surface to fester. Her appetite seemed to have only grown from what it fed on, rather than appeased or sated she felt even more desperate to jump back in the sack with him than she ever had before. Though he was as affectionate as always and unperturbed by handholding and hugging and linking arms, he hadn’t kissed her the whole day. And, though it wasn’t something she expected, he hadn’t given her any sort of preview or tease of what they might get up to that evening, either. His frequent touches were warm and friendly but as chaste as they’d been since the start of their relationship, though they certainly were less abundant then.

It was a tiny worry, but it was there, waiting.

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It crept up again at the end of the day, as they headed back to the TARDIS, because though her hand was securely in his as usual, the Doctor was mostly silent through the walk. His silence extended to her, leaving her with nothing to do but contemplate the reasons for the hiatus of his usual chatter.

But as the door had barely creaked and slammed closed behind them, the Doctor swiveled around, quickly tossing off his coat and extending open palms to her with an inquisitive stare.

“May I?” he asked, voice low. And she knew exactly what he was requesting.

“Yeah,” she answered immediately, a smile breaking across her lips as her tongue poked between her teeth.

Instead of his fingers twining with hers as she expected, his hands cradled her face as his lips eagerly captured her smile, reestablishing their direct line in a swift moment. Carefully he stepped forward, shuffling awkwardly until her back rested against the door, pinning her to it with his hips securely against hers as his tongue rushed between her parted lips. Thrilled by his impatience, her hands coursed through his hair before sliding down his neck to pull his tie (which he’d regrettably put on this morning) from his jacket. Her fingers loosened the knot while his hands drifted from her cheeks, fingertips trailing down her body until they reached her waist, curling around the hem of her shirt.

With a dazed chuckle she wondered at his speed and as he answered with only a deep, throaty sound of desire she happily yielded, realizing how silly that little worry had been as her shirt fell to the grating.

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A bit later, they were both fading from consciousness, exhausted, her head resting on his shoulder, fingers gently stroking the bare skin of his stomach as her eyes fought to stay open. His fingers stroked through her hair while his other arm was curled around her, fastening her to him. For a while it had been only the sound of their slow, gentle breathing as they relaxed, because the Doctor had eased them out of each other’s heads this time, remembering their conversation that morning. It was privacy she didn’t need, she realized, as she’d only realized how much she missed being connected when they were reunited after a day apart. It was ridiculous to even think they’d been apart. But it had seemed like it, for her at least. It was difficult to revert back, to resume a relationship as normal after sharing what they had. More difficult than she’d imagined.

She swallowed the request though, thinking the Doctor had also wanted a bit of privacy, and instead reached for another question she’d been forgetting to ask for a while. Perhaps his answer would lead them back to where she wanted them to be, in a roundabout way.

“Doctor?” she whispered.
“Yeah?” he answered instantly.

“Is that your real name, Doctor? Is that what they called you, even back home?” His arm tightened subconsciously around her as his chest froze, steady breaths halting for a moment.

“It’s the name I chose for myself,” he explained slowly.

“They let everyone choose their own names there?”

“No. Well, yes, I suppose,” he sighed again. “It’s not the name I was born with, if that’s what you mean.”

“What’s the name you were born with, then?” She was greeted only with silence, heartbeats quickening under her ear.

“You don’t have to tell me,” she offered. “Was just curious. I won’t tell anyone, though.” She didn’t dare tell him it was only random chance that she hadn’t thought of the question in the throes of passion, when he couldn’t have refused the question if he wanted to. It was rude to even think it and she mentally chastised herself.

For a long moment she could only hear him thinking (just the old school way, of course), but then in just above a whisper, his tongue was forming a swift, smooth collection of six foreign syllables. The sounds were vaguely familiar only because of things he’d said in his native language during times when she invaded the privacy of his mind. Silky, beautiful words, that carried power and sorrow through the quiet air, carried the remnants of a title and a man that her Doctor wasn’t anymore. But it sounded like him, like it would suit him, hadn’t she learned the name he gave her first. And she couldn’t help being struck with sadness at the fact that they’d just left the lips of the last person alive who could speak them. Well, she could change that.

She propped herself on her elbow suddenly, finding his eyes laden with anxiety and eyebrows pulled together, waiting.

“One more time?” she whispered.

He repeated the phrase, exactly as before, as she watched the way his tongue and lips formed the sounds, the shapes his mouth made. Tracing her fingertips over his lips, mesmerized by the lovely expressions they had formed, she echoed the sounds and tried to mimic the unique accent, carefully forming each foreign syllable. In her mind, it at least sounded close enough to the way he’d said it, but she was still nervous she butchered the terms, or may have overstepped a line.

But suddenly his arms pulled her in, crushing her lips to his with renewed desperation, and she could taste his relief and gratitude and awe that someone had just spoken to him in his native tongue, said words that he hadn’t heard for who knows how many years. This was huge for him, she realized, as his tornado of thoughts and anxieties on his name hit her with full force. Only Time Lords knew his true name, no one else had ever asked… Centuries of memories, reminders of pain and loss flared up within him again at the vivid reminder of his home, and she couldn’t help thinking it was her fault for bringing it up. He reassured her of the opposite, that every time she listened to a new confession it was helping him, it was a relief. So she just helped him through his struggle, taking his face in her hands as she returned his kiss with enthusiasm, walking with him through the darkness until he returned to light.

And, well, hearing Gallifreyan quite turned this Time Lord on, it seemed, judging by the smooth hardness brushing against her leg. Looked like they weren’t about to head to sleep, after all.
Later still, when they were both even more exhausted than before, the last thing he said before she faded was a plea.

“Don’t stop calling me Doctor,” he whispered.

*I won’t,* she assured him in their minds, honesty unmistakable. “*Doctor,*” she added aloud with the last of her energy, and she felt his thanks overwhelm her before she faded for the night.

The next four days at the games played out remarkably like the first, though they were never, ever bored. They might have been, though, the Doctor had said, if they’d stayed an extra day, and he didn’t want to take the chance. Their last night was a late one, catching last-minute races and events and crashing after-parties, soaking up as much patriotism as they could before heading home. The following morning, the Doctor’s promised trip to Rose came to fruition, but it wasn’t quite the place Rose had expected.

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“No. No way.” Rose shook her head in adamant refusal to step out the TARDIS doors. As far as the eye could see, towers and steel tracks loomed across the geography of the planet, extending to every horizon in any direction. The Doctor had said he’d take her to the best amusement park in the universe, but she hadn’t quite anticipated ‘best’ being equated with ‘most terrifying’ in his book. She should have expected it, thinking back on things he’d considered fun in the past.

“Aw, Rose, don’t be a spoil sport!” he whined, pouting his bottom lip as he tugged on her arm. The pout was hardly convincing, and his usual smile broke through it in a matter of seconds. “It’ll be fun,” he gestured to their general left, to a large sector of ominous, futuristic ‘rides’ that put the ones at Thorpe Park to shame.

“I’m not from the future, I haven’t – I dunno, I haven’t gone through enough years of practice to be ready for those. In case you’re forgettin’, in my time a hundred and fifty meters is a world record height for a roller coaster.”

“I am not forgetting,” he said matter-of-factly. “I also know that you faced down a Dalek fearlessly.” His expression softened as he pleaded with his stupid, brown alien eyes. “You fell hundreds of feet out of the sky after hanging from a rope on a war balloon! This is nothing compared to that.”

“Why would you even bring that up,” she muttered, rolling her eyes, not expecting a real answer.

“’Cause, if you can handle that, you can handle this,” he responded anyway, oblivious to her intentions at a purely rhetorical question.

“I dunno, that’s…” she trailed off as a particularly frightening orange beast taunted her from behind the Doctor’s head: something with a mountain range of ups and downs that a small car full of flailing passengers was racing through at breakneck speed.

“Rose,” he took her hands in his until she stopped looking at the rides and met his eyes. “You said you wanted a theme park. This is the best of the best! You’ll love it. Don’t you trust me?” he asked sincerely, brushing his fingers along hers just a tad seductively. His self-confidence had hiked up leaps and bounds over the last few days, and she knew it was due to nothing more than hearing his name (only Doctor, of course) on her lips in a hundred tones and volumes. Really, he wasn’t so different from a human bloke in that regard.

“Course I do,” she assured him, but her stomach was still twisting into a knot at the thought of even...
standing in the queue of some of the metal skyscrapers and tangles around them. Which, of course, the Doctor could easily pick up on even without pervading her thoughts.

“Well, how ‘bout this,” he said, stepping closer to lower his voice, courage and tranquil thoughts floating in waves to her. “We try one. You don’t like it, we leave straight away and I’ll make it up to you. However you want.” His expression was one she’d only become familiar with in the last few days, from the privacy of his bedroom. Like his usually brilliant brain had gone slightly mushy, like he was trying everything at his disposal to seduce her, and like she was the only thing he could see despite the superfluous distractions around them. It was working, like it always did, and suddenly he could feel it working, the telepathic git.

She could just make out his satisfied smirk and hum of victory before he pulled her into a kiss, teasing with passion and the briefest taste of his tongue to emphasize his point before pulling away too soon, leaving her breathless and wanting.

“Okay?” he whispered close to her lips without letting her reach them. They hadn’t gotten their fill the night before, having returned from their last day at the games so late Rose nodded off before the night could heat up. Nor that morning, as the Doctor had been too excited to leave their stationary landing spot to stay in bed a second after Rose was awake. So the previous day, they’d gone through their usual day of constant flirting and foreplay without any resolution. She’d become spoiled so quickly, she couldn’t remember how she tolerated the excess physical contact without jumping his bones for nearly a year.

“I don’t like it,” she breathed, struggling to pour strength into her voice. “How ‘bout you just make it up to me now?” It was a vain attempt and she knew it, but it was worth a shot, anyway.

“No,” he drawled. “You haven’t even tried it yet!” he pulled away with regained enthusiasm. “C’mon!” he shouted as he pulled her the rest of the way from the TARDIS and in the direction of what looked to be an entrance gate.

Somehow, the psychic paper got them inside without having to pay, and before she could ask how, the Doctor shrugged as he explained “looks like we have an annual pass for two,” quietly in her ear.

The atmosphere was cheery enough, all the colors and energy of Disneyland Paris and music echoing through the air it was difficult not to sway her hips to. The clientele was mostly humanoid; some species she recognized from their trip to the end of the world, which made her impressed with her memory. Adults and children alike, regardless of species, walked the crowded streets paved with something purple, passing through rows of vendors offering sweet and salty treats and souvenirs in an eclectic mixture like she’d never seen.

The Doctor wasn’t precisely leading her towards a square that contained several queue entrances, by their clasped hands between them, as he was looking about, watching passersby with his usual satisfied smile in the presence of multitudes, and seemed not to notice the direction they were walking.

“So, where are we headed first?” she asked.

“No idea,” he said, shrugging. “Never actually been here.”

“What?” she half-shouted in genuine surprise.

“What?” he retaliated, defensively. “You don’t have to actually visit to know it has universal acclaim. Besides, I’ve never quite felt up to artificial thrills when I have so many real, and life-threatening ones to deal with.”
“So, then, why’d you want to come at all?” If she’d known he was averse to the idea, she’d never have allowed him to take them.

“’Cause, you said you wanted to. It’s alright, I’m sure it’ll be fun,” he shrugged again, not sounding convinced. She realized it may have been silly to think the Doctor would enjoy being strapped to a metal car for a race around a predictable fixed track when he had a spaceship with no such restrictions.

“Doctor, I really only even brought this up because –”

“Don’t worry about me,” he interrupted, extricating her intention before she could form the words. “C’mon!” He towed her in the direction of the hulking orange contraption that had her stomach dropping before.

The queue went by too quickly, as they walked through mostly empty rows of bright white handrails and glowing blue signs boasting specifications like the 250-meter drop and top speed of 300 kilometers per hour. The Doctor seemed to dwell on different facts, flipping on his specs as he halted to read and gush on about the supermagnet braking system and the apparently impressive multi-faceted hydraulic launch system.

“… believe how far it’s come since chain lifts and braking pads. Humans, you’re a-ma-zing!” She was only-half listening but caught the end of his monologue as nerves made her brain fuzzy and her chest tight. She was always a bit nervous before the more extreme rides at other parks, but this was a degree like she’d never experienced before, so she was using all her effort to convince her mind it would be fun as they left the brightness of the outdoors into a small building and the loading dock came into view.

“Don’t worry I was scared too my first time but it’s ok, it’s fun, I’m even going on it again,” a brown-haired, dark-skinned boy (a human one, at that) that couldn’t be older than seven was explaining from the place ahead of them as the line moved again. The nerves must have really been visible, then. She shook off some of it from her face and smiled, returning his obvious excitement.

“Well, thanks for telling me. You’re a brave one, you are. When I was your age, I’d have never done something like this.” He smiled with quiet pride, shuffling his feet as he turned back to the others he was with, that looked similar enough to be his family. She realized he was shy, and turning to tell her what he did was more of a feat for him than she realized. She must either look really nervous, or else he was developing a miniature crush on her.

The Doctor had been silent through their encounter, but paid eager attention, interested how the situation would play out, and she couldn’t help feeling like it was a test, like he wanted to see if she could handle children, after all. Being an only child, she’d never really had to cope with younger siblings, and it wasn’t like she had a great relationship with her younger cousins, as she’d even mentioned to him. Perhaps she had some remnants of maternal-like instincts, if only from her mum, but in the back of her mind she wondered just how important children were to the Doctor, as a fresh wave of remembrance that he’d reared not only several of his own, but also grandchildren. She was so inexperienced, so young by comparison. It was something that frequently ate at the corners of her mind, and even in that moment she was chewing her lip, contemplating their future and wondering about families and age gaps just because of something a little kid had said in passing.

“Alright?” the Doctor asked, snapping her from that train of thought.

“Yeah, ’m good,” she smiled, shaking her head a bit to clear the lingering worries.

“Good,” he smiled back, tight-lipped, just a hint of pride coming through, and she thought she was
right about the test.

Her heart was about to leap out of her chest as they stood at one of the swiveling gates that were the only barrier between the crowd and the waiting, empty orange railings of the track, empty as they waited for another slick, jet black train to pull into the station. The Doctor was drumming his fingers against the closest available railing, tapping alternating feet at random, and if she hadn’t known better, she’d think he was nervous, too, but it must have been purely a manifestation of boredom. He hated loitering about, regardless of the circumstances.

A smooth metallic humming signaled the return of the train, and she looked to see the windswept hair and wild grins of the passengers and was at least mildly soothed that none were dead, injured, or crying. It was only then that she noticed they were all wearing the same exact model glasses. With a better look, she saw a vivid blue stripe racing through the middle of the train, with what could only be hundreds of tiny lights activating in succession as the line moved from the front to the back of the car. No sooner were the vehicles cleared than the Doctor practically dashed into his seat, restless enough that anything besides standing was a relief, but he watched carefully as she slowly stepped to the train to take the pitch black death-trap next to him. Her bum was greeted with comfortable, almost form-fitting cushioning, and for that she was grateful, as she was expecting the same rock-hard, unforgiving seats she’d come to expect.

Unable to mimic the Doctor’s nonchalance, she quickly fastened her own seatbelt and pulled down lap restraint, but when it didn’t make the characteristic clicking sounds that offered her the promise of security, she pushed it back up and it settled back into its starting position noiselessly. Swallowing another anxious sigh, she waited a few moments before trying again, resting her head against the back of the seat, which was shockingly like the seat of a car – not in feel but in shape. A second attempt at the restraint was again silent, but she tried to push back with no luck – it was indeed locked. She supposed she wouldn’t be getting the helpful clicks she wanted, after all, but was thrilled to find that it fit snugly across her hips against her calves, and was coated with the same soft material as the seats.

“Don’t worry it didn’t click. It’s not supposed to,” the Doctor explained, for he’d been watching her since she stepped inside. “Different locking mechanism than the old school way.” She just nodded. “I’ve always hated these things,” he grumbled, frowning as he pulled his own down, leaving several inches of space between it and his body and, apparently, hoping that would suffice for the safety check.

“What, you wanna fly off your seat and regenerate today?” she asked, bitter with nerves.

“Rose, what’s wrong? I thought you’d love this.” His voice was concerned and soothing as his hand covered hers on her lap bar.

But it was at that moment the two very average-looking blokes arrived at each side of the car, handing them both a pair of glasses with straps hanging from them before pulling at the restraints. As she might have expected, the further employee saw the Doctor’s and shoved it down until it landed tightly against his stomach.

“Woaaahhh,” he groaned, just as they were leaving.

“Too tight now?” she asked.

“A little.” His voice cracked as he fidgeted to get comfortable.

“See? You should have just tightened it yourself.”
“Oh, shut it,” he muttered in irritation, putting on the glasses and settling into a position that allowed him to wear the least discomforted grimace.

“Why do we have to wear these things, anyway?” she complained back as she turned them over in her hands.

“The wind would burn your eyes otherwise. Or you could get a bug in it. I think you may also want to keep your mouth closed once we’re moving.” She put on the glasses just in time to hear the “clear” and the sharp release of air that freed the car from whatever locked it into place. It settled suddenly on the track and they started to roll passively from safety and sanity and into whatever awaited them.

Which she couldn’t see, of course, until they’d rounded a sharp left corner and left the relative darkness of the indoor station, and she squinted almost painfully as she tried to make out the vast expanse of orange track that spread out before them. For a while, it only looked straight forward, then straight up. The car stopped abruptly only a dozen meters from the station as another glowing sign popped up to their right, informing them at the same time as a voice suddenly sounded from unseen speakers somewhere in the car to keep your head back, face forward. Closing her eyes, sealing her mouth shut, and bracing herself, she felt the Doctor’s hand on hers again, where it clutched tightly to the lap restraint that offered next to no grip for her fingers. Quickly exchanging the bar for his hand, she squeezed it madly, and when he pried only slightly she quickly let him in.

*It’ll be fun,* he encouraged her, only excitement and happiness in his tone and rushing over to her.

“Don’t let go,” she warned him, though she was already feeling better.

*Never.* He squeezed, too, reaffirming his presence. *I like this hand.* A robotic voice began a countdown from ten. *Mind you, I like some other things, too.* He was using her trick from the other night, his thoughts quickly becoming graphic as he reminded her how he’d make it up to her if she didn’t thoroughly enjoy this. She was smiling, as much as was possible without opening her lips, floating away from anxiety as the last three numbers sounded off, and they were catapulted forward.

The only thing Rose could compare it to was falling, only it was in the wrong direction, and it actually felt faster than falling. Squeezing the Doctor’s hand for dear life, she screamed, quickly abandoning her resolve to keep her mouth shut, bugs be damned. They hurtled up and over the first and largest hill, her internal organs becoming loose and weightless as they nosedived down what was an unprecedented plunge. Vaguely aware that the Doctor only chuckled brightly next to her, she realized through all her shouting and clamping down on his fingers and the wind howling around her face, it was only in her head she clung to fear. Nothing the ride itself had done yet had actually, properly scared her - she’d only hyped herself up too much, and her shrieking turned into laughing as she relaxed into the seat. The stiff muscles of her hand eased up on the Doctor’s, too, and he wriggled his fingers with the new flexibility, though neither of them could talk as they still barreled down the track.

After several more hills and banks, with a futuristic whooshing beneath them, they were finally lulled to a slow crawl as the train returned to the station.

“Well, that actually wasn’t boring!” the Doctor exclaimed, taking off his glasses.

“No, definitely not boring.” She followed his lead and blinked her eyes a few times.

“What’d you think?” he asked as they stepped out of their seats, reaching for her hand again.

“Oh, yeah, it was terrible,” she lied, knowing he’d catch on but wishing he’d keep his promise to
lavish her with conciliatory affection that evening. “I hated it, never doing it again.”

“No,” he just smiled at her as they walked, sneaking into her head and extracting the truth in seconds.

“Well,” he drawled, considering. “Maybe I’ll do that anyway,” he murmured, just out of earshot of the surrounding crowd.

The truth at her enjoyment out in the open, the Doctor was more than willing to stay a bit longer and see what else the planet had to offer. Within a couple hours they were on a semi-schedule of alternating food, walking while the Doctor rambled about physics and its unique relevance to the place, and hopping on more attractions than she’d have thought possible, as the queues were surprisingly short. Especially considering this was supposedly a universe-renowned, award-winning park.

“Why isn’t it more crowded?” she asked as they licked at their respective (and wonderfully familiar) ice cream cones during the hottest part of the afternoon.

“Well, what else is time travel good for? I just looked back at the attendance records and chose a day with minimal crowds.” Of course he did.

Once they’d finished their swirled treats, they were both wiping at each other’s face with their fingers, having made a chocolaty mess of their mouths that may have been on purpose.

Rose had nearly thrown up after a monster of a ride that had twenty inversions and seats that spun with a full 360 degrees of motion of their own accord. Luckily, the Doctor’d been prepared with the best anti-nausea medication the TARDIS had in stock, rustling the remedy from the depths of a pocket of his trousers and hurrying off to get her water to wash it down while she sat hunched over on a bench in the shade.

Later, he’d gotten his revenge for losing terribly at the arcade on the pier when he won a game of skill he recognized sixteen times in a row. She huffed in frustration but he easily won back her affection by telling her she could pick out which prize she wanted and keep it (not without a playful wink).

It wasn’t until the twin suns in the sky were setting that they decided to call it a day, as Rose was exhausted from the superfluous walking and thrills that broke the scales of any they had back on Earth. They found a perfect spot to rest and watch the sunset near the TARDIS, the adrenaline high slowly fading with the pastel colors of the sky, lying on the scratchy earth with linked hands until night overtook them and they stood creakily to wander inside. The only thing on her agenda besides sleep was a shower, but when the Doctor offered to join her again (“in the shower?” she’d asked, a deer in the headlights look on her face), she supposed she couldn’t turn him down, when he proposed this new level of intimacy and she’d turned him down before.

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“Which one was your favorite?” he asked, massaging shampoo into her scalp with adept fingers. She ground her teeth to stop the moan from going any further than her throat.

“I really liked… the wooden one… felt like home.” The words managed to escape as she supported herself with an arm against the marbled wall, hot, soothing jets of water raining over her chest to stream down her already dripping body.

“Hm,” he chuckled softly. “Of course you’d like the rickety, feels-like-it’s-about-to-fall-apart one. I
think it nearly dislocated my spine.”

“Shut up, it didn’t,” she teased with a laugh. He was far more resilient than she was, and she felt just fine. It wasn’t even as rickety as the Earth ones, because it wasn’t actually made of wood, only constructed and designed to feel like it. Close enough to the real thing that it felt more like what she knew than anything else, but she could still tell the difference.

As she rinsed her hair of the suds, a slippery hand landed on her back, a soft, soapy sponge on her collarbone as the Doctor started to gently scrub away the dirt and oils of the day. Slowly he worked down her torso, taking extra care with her breasts, and once her hands were freed from her hair he took each arm in turn, washing them, too. Her eyes stayed closed under the stream of water while her mouth fell open, fighting to get a grip, because, damn that sponge felt good. Better than hers. But then, perhaps that was only because she knew the Doctor’s hands held it as it massaged her skin.

She tried to focus on the scent, something sweet and floral with a hint of citrus, but it only added to the madness. Quietly he asked her to turn around, and when she complied he moved across her shoulders and down her back, stepping close to plant a messy kiss on her dripping neck as he finished. She sighed loudly and could feel his wide smile against her skin.

“Shall I get your legs, too, or do you want to do that?” He pressed against her from behind as he whispered in her ear.

“I’ve got it,” she answered quickly, glad for a chance to catch a breather, and he handed her the sponge as she turned back around. As quickly as possible she bent over to scrub at her legs, taking none of the time or caution that he did, but straightened to find he’d already scrubbed through his hair with the shampoo.

“Oh… sorry. You can condition it,” he offered.

“You condition your hair?”

“Course I do. How do you think it stays this soft?” She hadn’t yet met a bloke who used conditioner in his hair. But with him, she supposed it did make perfect sense, since so far he seemed to be roughly the opposite of every bloke she’d ever known.

He rinsed his hair while she doused more soap on the sponge and covered over his chest and stomach with suds. He had no qualms about humming with pleasure as she went, and she suddenly felt silly for having held back. She finished his arms, too, when the last of the white fluff left his hair, and nudged him to turn with a hand on his hip, starting with the sponge at the back of his neck while his head hung forward in content. Resisting the urge to squeeze his bum with her free hand, she stopped the sponge at the small of his back before placing it in his hand.

She spread conditioner through her own hair while he finished washing, making sure to knead it especially well into her roots and the ends, which were unfortunately beginning to fray. Hard as she tried not to notice, she was gaping as he squeezed soap from the sponge onto his hand and started to massage the suds slowly over his somehow still flaccid length. She just stared, her hands freezing in her hair, and he kept his eyes down, watching while his fingers meticulously kneaded the soft flesh from base to tip before moving lower, washing those sensitive mounds, too. Before he turned to rinse, he looked up, catching her staring wide-eyed.

“What?” he asked, unnerved.
“Uhm…” she floundered, shaking her head as she struggled to control the wild heat throbbing in her core from watching him touch himself, even briefly. “Why did you –”

“What’s the problem? It has to be clean, it has important places to be.” His explanation was so adorable she just giggled, admiration for him coupling with the growing, intense desire. She was also immensely glad he didn’t refer to it as a ‘he’ like many other blokes would.

“Suppose it does,” she agreed slowly. She waved him forward with two fingers before pouring more conditioner into her hands. He came gladly and she smoothed the slick, creamy stuff through his soaking hair, relishing the feel of it, soft and pliable between her fingers, the easy way the strands glided over her skin with the help of the conditioner.

“So, do you not… wash… uhm…” he started to ask, and he knew what he was getting at.

“Well, I’ve got this… special kind of soap. In my bathroom, I mean. It’s the only one I can use.”

He thought about that for a moment, his eyes closing while she reached around the back of his head, still massaging the conditioner into his skin and through the strands. She finished combing through his hair, and he opened his eyes and whistled softly, looking up to address the TARDIS. She’d actually sort of forgotten about that soap, and was a bit glad the Doctor had brought it up, and that he seemed not to feel awkward about any of it.

No sooner than five seconds after he’d asked, he turned around and picked up the bottle from a shelf behind the stream of water. It was the exact same one, because she recognized the half-peeled sticker on the front she’d picked at during countless restless nights thinking about how much the Doctor was driving her mad. He handed it to her with a shy smile, and made no move to look away.

“What, you want to watch?” she asked, in disbelief she probably shouldn’t be in.

“What? It’s only fair. I don’t feel embarrassed and you shouldn’t either. I’d do it for you, but I don’t know how you like it. I’d have to see you do it yourself.” She sighed, knowing he was right, and that if he felt comfortable enough to touch himself in front of her so should she.

Squirting a bit onto her fingertips, she slowly started to massage it into the short hairs on her lips, very careful to watch the Doctor’s feet rather than meet his ogling eyes. Slipping two fingers into her folds, she cursed inwardly that she was met with a slippery moisture that was unlike the wetness from the shower over the rest of her body. She gently worked the mild soap down, collecting as much of her own moisture as she could, stopping before any soap could reach her entrance and removing her hand.

Only then did she look up, finding his length happily greeting her and then his hungry stare as he gulped visibly.

“Switch,” she said, twirling the same fingers in the air while he stayed transfixed on them.

Wordlessly he was stepping out from under the stream of water so she could take his place. Rinsing the soap from where she’d just washed, careful to clear away the suds from within her folds to avoid any irritation later, she turned around, intending to start rinsing the conditioner from her hair, but the Doctor stopped her, pulling her towards him with both hands on her hips.

“Not yet,” he whispered. “This conditioner’s special. It needs at least ten minutes to soak in.”

“Hmm. What are we gonna do with the rest of the minutes we have, then?” she raised her eyebrows with a smirk.
“I had a few ideas,” he murmured, leaning in for an unusually wet kiss as his arousal pressed into her stomach. His fingers slipped between her thighs at the same moment his tongue grazed her lips, and she knew she was going to be alright with whatever his ideas were.

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They spent the next day mostly lounging about on the TARDIS, the Doctor working on some contraption in the lab after he’d expressed interest to tinker with something. It had been a while since he toyed with anything with that screwdriver, and she knew how restless he got when he had nothing to fix. She spent most of the day at the pool, floating on a raft while she eagerly devoured a text about Time Lord physiology, which she’d stolen from his ‘secret’ section of the library. It was the only thing in English she could find, and she wondered if the TARDIS hadn’t translated it from Gallifreyan, rustled it up personally for her. Still, she’d rather the Doctor not know what she was reading and asked the TARDIS to fabricate its cover, which she did willingly.

He came by to get here near dinnertime, saying he needed something he didn’t have in stock and he had to make a trip to some specialty market on an asteroid in a galaxy she couldn’t remember the name of. She gladly accepted his offer to come along, thinking she could pick up something for her mum while they were there. A ‘market’ must have all sorts of things, right?

As it turned out, they didn’t have many offerings suited to her mum’s interests, but she settled on something the Doctor said could predict the weather and thought she’d be thankful for the thought, anyway.

“Want to make a quick trip to give your mum that gift?” the Doctor asked that night, as they lay, sleepy and sated, wrapped around each other in his bed.

“Sure, ‘s a good idea,” she replied dreamily. “I can give her some laundry, too. Makes her feel important.” The last thing she felt before drifting was his lips pressing softly against her forehead.
To think, he’d been excited about this.

Sure, a bit confused, a bit startled. A bit astonished at how naïve humans could be, maybe even a bit superior (for a few isolated moments) for not succumbing to the ‘beauty’ of the mysterious creatures, as Jackie’d put it. But the strange, ethereal beings that humans across the globe were calling ghosts had intrigued him, and it had been a while since he and Rose had a real mystery to solve. Stupid, childish arse he’d been, calling them a pair of ghostbusters like it’d be fun. Like he had any idea what they were getting themselves into.

All his excitement faded as the morning went on. Each turn of events seem to only provide more evidence that he and Rose were in the eye of a storm, a temporary safe haven on the brink of a torrent of destruction and defeat. No matter which direction they tried to flee, the storm would catch up with them - there was no stopping it. The worst of it was, he should have known it twice as well because it was the very same ominous, ambiguous storm he’d seen brewing the week before. The further he was led into the depths of the Torchwood building, Rose left waiting in the TARDIS, the more he was certain of it.

He hated all of it. He hated the white walls and the clack of professional shoes on the floor. Hated Yvonne and the way she questioned everything he said. Hated watching more humans die, even doing away with a few himself, fitting as it was. Hated that Rose wasn’t by his side. Her hand wasn’t warm and firm his, moistening their grip with the sweat of anxiety. Her footsteps didn’t fall with his as he ran. No comforting words fell from her lips as the anger and fear mounted within him.

But more than anything else, he hated himself for leaving her behind.

“Doctor, they’ve got guns,” Rose warned him, positioning her body between him and the doors of the TARDIS, arms outstretched like it would stop him. The terror in her eyes was easy to read and easier to relate to, because he was feeling it, too. But rather than saying the truth, that she didn’t want to be separated, she went with a more general fear: that whoever was outside would shoot first, ask questions later.

“And I haven’t.” His hands landed on her waist, and as both of them were worried, the emotionally charged touch, effortlessly activated their link for the briefest moment as his urgent, stubborn hands tugged her from against the door.

Reasons why she shouldn’t worry rushed form his head, that he was leaving her behind so she’d be safe, but she was arguing with him in an instant and his last-ditch dive for reassuring her belly-
flopped instantly.

“Which makes me the better person, don’t you think? They can shoot me dead, but the moral high ground is mine.” It was the last thing he said to her as he stepped out of her line of communication and her reach, turning only briefly to see such pain and disappointment in her eyes that he fled through the door instantly, saying no more.

Without a doubt, he’d taken them a step back – no, a leap back. From pure and uninhibited honesty (that was sometimes almost embarrassing) to this, to hiding his feelings from her and bolting from a difficult discussion, to making a decision for her again: that she’d be safer in the TARDIS, rather than with him. Well, to be fair, he had seemed the target of Torchwood’s hostility at the time.

But he’d seen her on the screen, later, trapped in the room with the void ship, clad in what was undoubtedly a stolen lab coat, and his stomach dropped. He’d seen the Cybermen only minutes later and one of his hearts stopped working, making him gasp to try to recover the rhythm and his breath. Stoic killing machines were on the loose in droves and Rose was outside of the protection of both his ship and himself. The worst possible outcome quickly leapt into his mind: that he was going to lose her because of his own mistake. He became so sure of it as their chances dwindled that he was prepared to ask to be deleted if events unfolded the way he dreaded. He wouldn’t deserve to live and wouldn’t deserve to be the hero of this universe, if Rose was taken from it.

There would have been tears in his eyes, but he had centuries’ practice plastering on his façade, so he became his own oncoming storm, cementing his best dangerous, ascetic expression into his features. He just tried to think of any way he could get to her, to have her with him when whatever fate awaited them closed in. He knew it would be fatal, somehow, to which of them he wasn’t sure, but he was too selfish and too terrified to be alone anymore. He needed her.

Instead, he watched on in helpless horror as the void-borne sphere re-emerged into existence, and if that wasn’t enough, now there were bloody, vile Daleks and he nearly recoiled in on himself, panic and guilt flooding through his veins while he barely kept up his front. Before he could stop himself, he was snapping bitterly at everyone who confronted him, even shooting down Jackie’s questions to her own daughter’s whereabouts. It only piled on remorse to the hurricane of other thoughts when he saw the pain he felt reflected in her eyes.

And he cursed himself mentally because prematurely he promised Jackie that she and Rose would be safe, even when he didn’t believe it himself. Desperately he wanted it to be true, wanted to believe that he could save her, that they could make it through this. But his damned premonitions never stopped yanking on the threads of his sanity, taunting and bullying him whether it was screaming or whispering that this was the day they’d be separated forever. Deplorable profanities streamed through his mind in every language he knew. Two of his biggest enemies in one city – one building, no less – and he’d inadvertently left Rose alone.

Somehow, though, he found her. Before the Daleks had a chance to harm her or force her to open their mysterious device. His muscles ached to leap across the space between them, to take her in his arms and shield her from them all, to feel relief spread through his limbs as he squeezed her against his chest. But with these depraved machines, he couldn’t show any kind of vulnerability; he had to maintain his casual demur, the haughty attitude as he took advantage of what little fear he sparked in their slimy little brains. Then there was the issue of his cowardice, the fact that he couldn’t bear for Rose to see what was stewing in his black hole of a mind. It became an automatic decision to prevent unnecessary physical contact, knowing he’d be broken if she saw the one person she looked to for hope had nearly given his up.

All he could manage to Rose was a quiet ‘how are you?’ and acknowledgement of an answer he
didn’t believe about before moving on to Mickey. Didn’t believe because nothing would change his mind that she wasn’t ‘good’. The worst possible creatures he could think of were threatening her world and her life and she was acting like she was alright with it.

It was when he watched Jackie and Pete reunite with their long-lost, alternate versions of each other that it struck him. As he watched Rose’s face, the silent relief at their embrace, the quiet hope that her parents might just be able to work this out, that they could rebuild the vestiges of a family again. It was difficult for him to be truly happy for Pete, as he hardly knew the bloke, nor for Jackie, as she always sort of rubbed him the wrong way. But for Rose, it was a picture she’d always dreamed of. The first trip she had the courage to request on her own was to see her dad. The first time she ran away from him in that parallel world, even when he deserved it for what he’d done, was to see her dad, or was it her parents together? Either way, there was no denying it was something she wanted desperately. Whether she wanted it more than she wanted him, he wasn’t sure.

Next thing he knew, he was staring out the window of the Torchwood skyscraper, watching Daleks crowd the air, mind racing to think of a plan to save this universe before it fell to desolation. The idea came to him just as he caught the tail end of Pete offering Jackie a life with him in the other universe.

“It’s not just London, it’s the whole world. But there’s another world, just waiting for you, Jacks, and it’s safe. As long as the Doctor closes the breach.” Pete was exactly right. It was safe, and safe was where Rose belonged. Not with him, the man who kept putting her in harm’s way.

“Doctor?” he addressed him. To be fair, he was impressed with the plan, and more than a little enthusiastic about the prospect of sending the Daleks into the void. But he wasn’t entirely certain it was going to work, and he couldn’t guarantee Rose’s – or anyone else with voidstuff, for that matter – safety any more than he could ensure his own if she stayed in this universe. Smashing down the swell of despair at the thought of what he was about to do, he turned to them, prepared with a smile and his usual air of confidence.

“Oh, I’m ready!” he beamed. But his hearts couldn’t be farther from it.

He could hardly look Rose in the eyes as he explained to the rest, but her smile was so brilliant as she listened to his words and put her trust in his plan that he was nearly undone, his hastily constructed pretense threatened to collapse any second.

Rose, of course, picked it all up within a few seconds while the others looked on in confused frustration, waiting.

“But it’s… like you said. We’ve all got voidstuff. Me, too, ‘cause we went to that parallel world. We’re all contaminated, we’ll get pulled in.” Rose examined her hand, confirming her hypothesis before pulling off her glasses. She was exactly right: they would all get pulled in. To allow Rose to risk her life to chance making it through the gravity of the void was one thing; assuming she’d leave behind her friends and family to do it was another entirely. He couldn’t protect them all, not in a million years. They had to go back. She had a choice, but he wasn’t about to let her make it. His promise to Jackie rang in his ears and he realized, even before this horrendous day, he had a responsibility to keep her safe, for her mum’s and his own sake. He couldn’t live with himself if he failed that responsibility.

If protecting her meant sending her away, it’s what he would do. But his stomach flipped as he walked up to her, gulping down anxiety and tremors as he stared at his shoes for a moment, mustering the courage to look her in the eyes. He knew exactly how much she hated it when he made decisions for her and especially when he separated them – still hadn’t heard the end of it, really.
“That’s why you’ve got to go. Back to Pete’s world.” He shouldn’t have looked in her eyes. The beauty, the acceptance they contained… like suddenly he was at home, and now the concoction of love and confusion gleaming from them was a blow to the chest. Shaking her head slightly, she silently demanded some explanation other than the obvious. Like a coward he abandoned her inquisitive gaze, turning to Pete just to say ‘we should call it that, Pete’s world’ with fabricated excitement.

Only more fear, more hurt that he caused greeted him dimly as he turned to her again. Rose wore her emotions on her sleeve and he loved her dearly for that, but he couldn’t reciprocate her display, though it was almost killing him, his resolve nearly breaking at the pain in her eyes. He was well-versed at locking his emotions in a steel cage and he had to pull every last trick he had for doing so from the depths of his experience because he never thought he’d be doing this to her again. Seven days. Seven days was all the universe had allowed him once he built up the resolve and the emotional capacity to open up to her, connect with her. He should have known. Well, he had known, really. Everything he feared, being actualized so soon after taking that step… it was typical of the universe. Words kept forming on his tongue, though he hadn’t the faintest idea how.

“I’m opening the void, but only on this side. You’ll be safe on that side.”

To her, he might have looked as indifferent as one of the Cybermen, as heartless as the Daleks with his steely, stone-cold resolve. But in his mind, apart from her, he was paper and glass, his insides tearing and shattering more and more by the second, as Rose’s confusion and hurt transformed to unmistakable terror, something he could relate to only privately. But for once in his life, he wasn’t going to be selfish. He was going to keep her safe, because humans could recover, they could heal. She could live a life without him, surrounded by friends and family, move on even when he couldn’t. No, this would cut clear through him, leave his hearts wounded and beyond repair until the day he next regenerated, when his emotions went through a factory reset with his new body.

“And then you close it, for good?” Pete asked.

“The breach itself is soaked in voidstuff, in the end it’ll close itself,” he replied mechanically, trying to focus on those mechanics, the explanation that in that moment was a life raft, rescuing him from drowning at the sight of Rose’s distress. “And that’s it. Kaput.”

“But you… stay on this side?” she said, voice quieter, striving to eliminate the unwitting eavesdroppers from their conversation.

“But, you’ll get pulled in.” Mickey’s concern for his safety was the perfect excuse to break away, because Rose was going to destroy him. His eyebrows pulled together in anxiety, lips parted in disbelief, eyes shouting at him to tell her what she wanted to hear even in the silence that followed her question. He treated her question as rhetorical, ran away because in five seconds he would take his forbidden fruit and follow her through to the other universe.

Running away. What he did best, what he’d always done best, and what Rose had started a row with him about on more than one occasion. He knew precisely how much it was going to sting, and thought he might as well use it to his advantage. Maybe if she thought he was insensitive and brusque, she’d be more inclined to leave him behind.

“That’s why I’ve got these!” he shouted, retrieving one of the mass cancelers from an adjacent, glass-walled room. “I’ll just have to hold on tight, been doing it all my life.”

“I’m s’posed to go.”

“Yeah.” The black hulk of an object clattered to the floor, making a perfect manifestation of how he
could make the room flinch at his emotionless replies.

“To another world, and then it gets sealed off.”

“Yeah.” Again the word was terse, short; he didn’t even look at her as he drove the wedge between them, like he’d forgotten how they’d come together from so far apart, struggled through so much to close that gap in the first place.

“Forever.” He made no answer, this time. Nothing he could say could rectify the injustice of the situation.

“That’s not gonna happen.” He caught her smile out of the corner of his eye; she was certain of it. But he always guessed she wasn’t going to yield to his plan so easily, because, despite how it contradicted reason, she loved him, and he realized nothing he did to try to distance himself was going to change that.

The building gave a loud, violent shake.

“We don’t have time to argue. The plan works, let’s go.” Pete was taking charge of the situation, fearing for his own and Jackie’s safety but likely not much else. “You, too, all of us,” he directed the command to Rose.

“No, I’m not leavin’ him!” The words were daggers in his ears, and his chest constricted, his forehead creased even further than it was, worry compounding the anger and concentration. But he banned himself from even glancing up from the computer. This was too much to ask of him, to send her away when all he wanted was to run to another universe with her, keep her with him forever. It wasn’t fair, it wasn’t in the same realm as fair. He had a responsibility to save this godforsaken universe and a responsibility to keep her safe, and preferably with her family. So he was left without a choice.

“I’m not going without her,” Jackie told Pete, voice commanding and resolute.

“Oh my God, we’re going!” He couldn’t blame Pete for being frustrated, he supposed. He was making the logical decision, to keep them all out of harm’s way, and from his perspective, sure, Rose was being unreasonable. Probably saw her as nothing more than a lovestruck young woman who didn’t know what was best for her. His hands balled into tight fists with anger at her alternate father, even though he’d just put the thoughts in Pete’s head himself, when he wasn’t even sure they belonged there. Rose was a thousand times more than that, more intelligent and loving and important than that.

“I’ve had twenty years without you, so button it! I’m not leaving her.” He had to be proud of Jackie Tyler, despite his aversion to spending large amounts of time with her, because even in a moment like this, she stood her ground. Took Rose’s side time and again, like the caring and loyal mother she should be. Rose should be with her, they shouldn’t be separated. She should never have to choose between her mother and him.

“You’ve got to.” It was Rose now. He expected it, really, for Rose to try to convince them all to leave without her.

“Well, that’s tough!” Jackie insisted.

“Mum, I’ve had a life with you for nineteen years. But then I met the Doctor.” Here it was. Something he didn’t have the emotional capacity to hear right now – Rose explaining to her own mother why she was about to leave her forever, sealed in a parallel universe, to stay with him instead.
Of course, he wanted to hear it. To hear the woman he loved say that she loved him too, and that he mattered to her and she wasn’t going to abandon him if she had a choice in the matter. But this time she didn’t. He couldn’t let her sacrifice herself and her family for him. And he hated himself for thinking it but he had to sneak up on her if this was ever going to work.

“And… all the things I’ve seen him do for me, for you, for all of us, for the whole stupid planet and every planet out there… He does it alone, mum.”

His heavy feet were carrying his deadened legs across the room, where he made eye contact with Pete. As he pulled his dimension-hopping necklace from his jet-black coat with an almost imperceptible nod, a silent conversation, a mutual understanding passed between them. The button Jake gave him was still in his pocket. Dangling it free by the necklace, it was ice-cold, heavy in his hands that he could have sworn were clammy with sweat, though it must have been in his imagination. The only time that ever happened was when Rose’s hand made it so.

He swallowed hard, taking a final look at his Rose, though it was just the back of her head, her light blue jacket and dark trousers that he had to keep with him the rest of his life.

“…But not anymore.” He stopped breathing altogether, respiratory bypass kicking in much sooner than he ever thought. She was stepping backwards, showing as much as telling how he wasn’t going to be alone anymore, a bold display of her choice – the Doctor over her family.

“’Cause now he’s got me,” was the last thing he heard as he met her halfway, slinging the cruel device around her neck with trembling hands. He was glad she couldn’t see him in that moment, because he could feel his mask had been stripped away, the carefully practiced façade has disintegrated and left anguish on display. Only Pete would have noticed, but he either didn’t notice or didn’t care as he slammed both his hands on his own device.

With a metallic ripping sound and a swirl of light, they were gone.

He stood, staring after them for a moment, but he couldn’t dawdle. There was no use sticking behind to save the planet if he wasn’t going to do any saving. Crushing down the anguish until after he’d stopped the metal monsters, he shuffled back to the computer screen, nearly tripping over his almost numb legs. He just has to calibrate the system just so that the breach will be open long enough. Shutting down any part of his brain not linked with pragmatism in that moment, his hands mechanically typed, clicked…

That sound permeated the room again.

“I think this is the on switch…” It was Rose. He jerked his head around, his hearts fluttering, the anxious creases in forehead relaxing as she comes into view. She really wasn’t going to go without a fight, maybe she wouldn’t be going at all. Thoughts of forever with her were racing through his mind already, jumping ahead of himself in his immediate elation to see her. But he took hold of himself, because he had to make sure she understood, though, fully understood the gravity of the choice she was about to make, because he hadn’t really explained that the walls between the universes were going to close again, close irreparably, irreversibly. Dashing from the desk over to where she stood, he instantly broke his hours-strong rule prohibiting touching, his hands taking her arms forcefully in his distress.

“Once the breach collapses, that’s it! You’ll never be able to see her again, your own mother!” Please, please listen. Don’t let this guilt rest on me if you change your mind. I can’t handle any more. Desperate as his eyes bored into hers, hazel pools of calm confidence. Of love.

“I made my choice a long time ago, and I’m never gonna leave you.” Even when he didn’t give her a
choice, she chose him. He’d have to live with that, if she ever regretted it. He was sure she would, even as he gazed into eyes that couldn’t lie, rimmed with mascara, creamy skin flushed red with adrenaline… How could she want to stay with him forever, apart from everyone she ever knew? He’d let her down someday, like he always did. Or put her in danger, like he was doing right now.

“Doctor, shut it. I can take care of myself.” She’d heard everything, crept inside his mind through their connection, and he looked down to find she now held his hand. Her grip only tightened when he tried to pull it away, staring him down fiercely. He wanted to feel guilty for being so excited, for her choosing him, for not leaving him alone like everyone else did, but he couldn’t, he wanted her with him so much it ached. A thousand emotions clouded his thoughts, overwhelming awe of her selflessness, fear he would fuck things up, just a glimmer of hope, a faint trace of happiness that maybe they’d get through this storm after all. Come out the other side hand in hand and face blue skies and sunshine, leave the black clouds and thunder behind.

“We will, Doctor, we can do this together. I’m not leavin’ you.” He was so stunned and so weak, he couldn’t hold himself back. I love you. It permeated her mind before he could stop it, the Gallifreyan declaration of an unbreakable bond in his own voice, the elegant, authoritative cadence of a Time Lord.

Doctor, what does that mean? You’ve said it before, but it doesn’t translate. She asked the question in silence this time, guessing how intimate the answer would be.

He tugged his hand away roughly this time, ensuring their link was broken before his mind automatically translated it for her, answered the question.

He didn’t want her to find out like this, in a moment of terror after a shaky reunion they hadn’t exactly agreed upon. Once they got through this, he’d tell her, or he might. He was rubbish with words, though. Really he was rubbish at doing anything to show her what she means to him, and he was reminded again how much he didn’t deserve her. How she was still in danger even now, because they were still facing down the worst of the storm. So many things had yet to come to pass, and it hit him suddenly, the stinging, icy reality that she could die because of her choice. And he’d have to watch her die, watch her get sucked into the void or shot by a Dalek or fried by a Cyberman if his master plan was somehow derailed.

NO! It couldn’t happen. It wouldn’t. Damn it, he was going to make sure he kept her safe because she just sacrificed everything for him. He had to keep her safe. He didn’t deserve her love until he did, and he knew if he confessed it to her, she’d say it back to him before he was ready to hear it. She had to be alive, free of danger, not staring down a treacherous situation if they were to ever exchange those promises. Not now.

“What can I do to help?” Rose asked, breaking him from his grim introspection. She wasn’t even upset with him, not outwardly. Crestfallen, perhaps, a touch of rejection and fear around her eyes, but her mind was made up. He just wanted to punch himself in the face for making her fall in love with him because he sure as hell didn’t give her what she needed.

With furious determination, he set his plan in motion. They had to get this over with so he could stop hurting her and start making all this up to her.

“Those coordinates over there, set them all at six. And hurry up!” Yep, it came out all wrong. Harsh and demanding when he wanted to be delicate and reassuring. Tended to happen that way a lot, it seemed. Why she wanted to be with him was something he’d never understand, but she listened to him, walking over to follow his instructions, because clearly she did – she did want to be with him.

“We’ve got Cybermen on the way up!” she announced suddenly, catching him off guard again.
“How many floors down?” he asked, running up behind her to watch the camera.

“Just one.”

He ran to the other monitor, but watched in awe as a rogue stopped the others from ascending the staircase, opting not to think too hard about the rebel or the person it used to be. They both quickly finished setting what they needed to and he heard the announcement over the speakers.

“Levers operational.” He couldn’t help smiling a little, hopeful this was going to work.

“That’s more like it, bit of a smile,” Rose said, approaching him. He bloody well better start reacting better to the fact that she was so well attuned to him, anxious to know that he was happy about her coming back for him. He could at least show her that, if not the full depth of his unending affection. He had to at least try to show her he was euphoric to have her back without showing he clung to a lingering terror of losing her through different, more sinister means.

“The old team! Hope and Glory, Mutt and Jeff, Shiver and Shake…”

“Which one’s Shiver?” she asked.

“Oh, I’m Shake.” He pushed one of the handles into her arms and they walked to opposite ends of the clinically white room.

“Press the red button,” he called as they both positioned the handles onto the wall opposite the blank other end of the room, where the gaping hole in the fabric of reality would soon split open.

“When it starts, just hold on tight,” he explained. Oh, god, hold on tight, Rose. “It shouldn’t be too bad for us, but the Daleks and the Cyberman are steeped in voidstuff.” Rose followed him to the second, giant metal lever protruding from the pristine floor as his hands closed around the first.

“You ready?”

“So are they,” she said, eyes traveling to a window opposite them, where a handful of Daleks were closing in on the building, clear intentions to break through and access their target. Undoubtedly, he was that target now; they would have felt the breach being activated.

“Let’s do it!” he yelled, unable to wait for her affirmative. They threw the levers, and he ran to his own post but hardly cared if he grabbed on because his eyes were pinned on Rose, ensuring she got a secure grip on the handle, that looked small and weak in perspective now. Her elbow hooked around it and a surge of hot relief flooded through him, making the subsequent wave, when he heard the first of the Daleks crash through the glass and rush into the void in a torrent of wind, paltry in comparison.

It got exhilarating, even exciting then, because the handles were working and Rose was securely fastened to hers. They were winning, the plan was coming to fruition and he thought just a few more seconds they’d hold on and it’d be over, but the universe had other plans, events took a dark turn for the worse.

The lever behind Rose was creeping back to its starting position, ever so slowly creaking back towards the floor as the robotic voice over the intercom announced ‘offline.’ He didn’t know how it could have happened, whether Rose didn’t click it into place properly or there was a binary malfunction or the universe just enjoying fucking him over. With every inch that it descended his stomach dropped further in his gut, because Rose was watching and he could see what she was thinking, even then. That she was going to right the wrong herself.
The force field drawing in the enemies weakened, the rate of their journey into the void slowed noticeably, and Rose moved. One of his hearts stopped as one of her arms slipped from around the handle, purposefully reaching for the lever, to bring it back up before it could fall. But her other hand slipped and she transferred her grip, both hands closing around the lever rather than the sturdy handle. Her feet slipped around the base and was starting to push it back up, but the more she pushed the stronger the gravity became.

“Hold on!” He shouted over the tearing sound of the wind.

“I’ve got to get it back up!” she insisted.

Panic brought him quickly to hyperventilating as he glued his eyes to her, and he knew this was it. Rose was brave and wonderful and perfect and wanted to help the world rather than herself, and she was going to die for it. And he was going to have to watch her die, get sucked into the void with creatures that actually belonged there and be lost forever.

She got the lever fully snapped into vertical and the pull properly accelerated, making her cry out and her body flail like she was dangling in midair.

“Hold on!” he repeated, screaming as loud as his lungs were able as the noise became unbearable but it was no use. She looked over to him as she realized her fate; her two handed-grip became one, and that hand slipped until it was only her fingers holding her there. No. No! He could stop it… he could leap onto his own lever and push it back down, give her enough time to get a better grip and she’d be alright…

But he knew he couldn’t. The pull was too strong now, he’d fall in before he touched the lever. Futilely he reached out for her, needing his arms to stretch the distance, to shift the gravity to his body, to let her fall into his arms and not into nothingness.

But it was too late.

The images developed in slow motion: one by one her fingers slipped from the lever until she fell, her hair blowing with the wind, her scream reaching his ears even through the blast of matter. Their entire life together flashed before his eyes, faster even than she could fall. Taking her hand in that shop and running, kissing her in a toga in Rome, dancing on a pier over the Pacific, telling her about the war and really surrendering himself to her, being purely mentally connected as they made love.

He didn’t want to see it anymore, any of it, was just screaming uselessly to her while the onslaught only reminded him this was his fault. She was only twenty years old and she was getting her life taken from her because of him.

She was nearly at the divide of the breach and he was going to let go. Maybe there was something in the dead space after all, maybe he could be with her there. If not, better for him to die than live with the guilt and debilitating pain. He was still shouting her name, willing the bloodcurdling sound to bring her back, but he let his arm slip a little, preparing himself to meet his demise with her, when she stopped falling.

Her father caught her.

With a final glance back to him, Rose disappeared along with Pete as he pushed the button a final time. Time sped up again and he was still reeling, heaving in deep breaths to recover from screaming when the breach closed, the last contortions and wobbles of the parallel wall fading out as it became solid again.
The seconds ticked numbly in his head as he stared at the empty white wall, waiting for her to come back. Waiting for it to be another nightmare he would wake from. Rose would hear him screaming and snuggle closer to him in their bed (as it had become), and just hold him while he told her what happened. He’d squeeze her tightly and apologize for everything he’d ever done and never let her go again. Never bring her back home, never let this happen. But it wasn’t a dream: Rose was gone.

He should be happy, he told himself. He got what he wanted in the first place – she was alive and with her family. But ice locked around his hearts until they were hardly beating, airways constricted until he was forced into respiratory bypass again, there was a pain in his chest like nothing he’d felt since the Time War. A fresh wound, a gaping emptiness that ached to be filled again, along the edges a stabbing pain like a knife driving through flesh and bone.

But as he stepped away from his life raft, ambled towards the opposite wall instinctively, the pain was dulled because the ice in his heart was spreading, filling up his chest and his limbs and numbing his recent memories. Somewhere out there, she was in a room identical to this one, if only darker, in the abandoned Torchwood building in that other world. He thought maybe she’d be leaning against the wall where she was caught, he knew she’d be upset.

His palms touched down on the cold wall and he leaned against it, a wisp of something like Rose tickling his senses, but he was sure he was just imagining it. Any sort of communication between parallel worlds was impossible. He thought about crying or yelling or trying to do something to reverse it but none of them happened, he just pressed his cheek against the unsympathetic, whitewashed wall and didn’t let himself feel much at all. He didn’t deserve to have her after everything, and so he wouldn’t. And he was going to have to be content with that fact. She was with her family and she had a chance at happiness there, happiness away from his misadventures fraught with danger.

So he stepped away.

Leaving the wall, the room, the building behind him, and just going home, hands in his pockets, his face blank. He passed people who recognized him but he ignored their questions, even ignored pleas for help from injured civilians once he’d reached the streets. The world could deal with cleaning up the mess because he’d done enough, sacrificed enough to save it. He just wanted to cower away from humanity, the race that betrayed him by allowing the breach to open at all, paving the way for the whole thing to happen.

He fell back against the door as he closed it, shutting his eyes when he was finally free from having to hide from anyone. The TARDIS immediately sensed he wasn’t waiting for anyone, that Rose wasn’t about to step inside with him and easily extracted why from his mind. The memories replayed as he confessed them to her, the only sentient creature who would listen, gnawing at the fresh gash in his chest until he told the TARDIS to back off, that he didn’t want to experience it again. He didn’t have any friends left, the only family he had just got imprisoned in another universe.

“She’s gone,” he sighed rhythmically as he trudged across the console, a hand on the railing to support his increasingly heavy frame as he reached the hall, vision tunneling as an old darkness overtook him.

His room was closer than usual, and he thanked the TARDIS silently despite himself as he crashed through the door, stumbling on the carpet he’d somehow forgotten existed. Heading for his bed, to collapse in the blankets and hide in the vortex indefinitely, he was stopped cold at the sight of what was atop it.

Rose’s pajamas, perched near the edge, crumpled haphazardly like they’d been thrown there. On his insistence Rose had moved a stockpile of clothes to his room, not to mention all her toiletries to his
bathroom, and she’d changed into her clothes that morning in a bit of a rush, excited about the banana waffles he was making before going off to see her mum (which she was always excited about). She must have taken off the pajamas in a hurry.

He wanted to yell at the TARDIS for leaving them there, when she knew what it would do to him, but none of this was her fault. He sank to his knees, taking the shirt in his hands and gathering every last bit of herself she’d left behind on it, from skin cells to lotion that had rubbed off to evaporated sweat. His head fell on the bed and it was saturated with her scent, everything from her shampoo to the natural perfume of her skin, her vanilla lotion to the flavor she’d left behind as they made love. His sucked in a breath with a loud whooshing sound and his muscles shook from trying to hold back tears, his eyes stinging, cheeks heating, throat swelling from the effort.

A week.

A week was all the universe gave him to be with her. Really be with her, like they were meant to be. He hadn’t shared himself like that with anyone since the war, and even before that, it had been decades, centuries even since he let himself be so vulnerable with another human where emotions were so strong… It suited his life, he supposed, that no sooner had he finally made that connection she was taken from him. He was right all along, to keep her at arm’s length all those months, to be wary of letting her in his damaged soul, because it was only more damaged now. His previous incarnation was shell-shocked, lonely before he met the love of his life, but he was born out of pain and loss and war, could handle himself better. This him was born knowing her and loving her and this pain was competing for a place in his archives of misery, because this spirit was so vulnerable, Rose had softened and opened him up and now he was naked and exposed to the throbbing pain of losing her, lacking the calloused and shielded soul of his previous body. He was right to be afraid all along, and he’d never been more upset at being right in his life.

Dragging himself onto the bed by the blankets, he crawled forward until his head hit the pillow and he squeezed his eyes shut, forcing withheld moisture to escape, wanting to be knocked unconscious, to feel nothing. Only the night before he thought he’d never sleep alone again, and here he was not twenty-four hours later, isolated and desolated.

No form of sleep blessed him with reprieve, and instead he was imagining she was with him.

Golden hair flowing around her, a gleaming white smile, a light that chased away the darkness threatening to swallow him. Her soft hands massaging up and down his back to comfort him, her warm chest pressing into his, thawing the built-up ice in his hearts. Her hands running through his hair as she asked him what was wrong, her thumb stroking along his cheek while she held his face. Her silky, gentle lips relaxing his tense jaw, touching the falling tears and willing them away, pressing to his mouth as she accepted all his pain until it disappeared between them. Those eyes staring into his, the soft greens and yellows that would shine with happiness and compassion as she told him it was going to be alright, that she’d never leave him again.

Bundling up the blanket next to him, he hugged his arms around it, pulled it to his face and just breathed her in, indulging his fantasy though his subconscious lowered his inhibitions, let loose salty droplets into the pillowcase, slowly saturating it beneath his cheek. Against his wishes the TARDIS only assisted him in fabricating the dream, infiltrating his mind to enhance the sensations, knowing Rose’s DNA and scents and body as well as he did. He’d be upset with her but he couldn’t be, because he just clung to his memory of holding Rose in his arms, living in that peaceful moment for a time.

He didn’t know how long it was he stayed there, silent tears streaming from his closed eyes, huddled against nothing but a blanket, trying to commit every detail of Rose to his permanent memory,
worried he may already have lost some of her perfection in the haze. His clock either wasn’t working or he hadn’t an ounce of brain energy to listen to it. But too soon, the TARDIS was tugging him out of his miserable lie, trying to tell him something.

Reluctantly he opened his eyes, his eyes stinging and chest hollow at the sight of nothing but the blanket in his arms, the cold feel of the other half of the bed next to him, devoid of human warmth. Rubbing his eyes and shaking his head a couple times, he listened for what she had to say, knowing his ship only ever wanted to help, and was usually right.

*Oh.* Yes, it would probably work… He rubbed the wetness from his cheeks quickly with his palms, letting go of the blanket. He sniffed a handful of times, sorted out his breathing. *Oh, yes, girl, there is a way.* Slowly sitting up, he absently tried to mash down his mussed up hair for no one but himself, mind churning and flickering with tiny sparks of hope. She helped him hammer out the details in only a matter of seconds and he stood slowly, working out the creaks from lying for too long, before heading from his room to his workshop. To seize his chance to see Rose one last time, to give her a proper farewell. All he needed was power. A *lot* of power.
I'm so, so sorry. For the delay, and for what's to come. Just try to remember this is not the end! I took some liberties with unexplored events in this chapter - ones that some may disagree with. Feel free to let me know if something is offensive or to ask me why I interpreted this period of time the way that I did. Once again, I inserted a bit of script into a canon scene that suited my needs and (maybe) piled a little more misery onto the chapter. *runs away*

Warnings: intense angst, depression, allusions to infidelity.

Rose didn’t even bother with a shower before stripping off her work clothes and collapsing into bed. Her polka-dot pajamas were still strewn across the empty half of the bed, so she slung the shirt over her head but thought to hell with the damned trousers because she wouldn’t be needing them. It had been another one of those days – eight hours on-site collecting evidence and eyewitness accounts from a supposed Weevil incident. Another four at her office filling out paperwork and helping everyone else with theirs, not to mention all the other pathetic problems that accompany a poor work ethic.

And it was only once the sun had gone down, only moonlight gleaming through the giant windows, when even the last of the overachieving stragglers had called it a night, that she spent another four chasing after her increasingly vain mission. Scouring every hidden room of Torchwood’s secret files, pilfering through government databases on her dad’s computer, even resorting to the Internet now and again, hunched over her own computer with dead eyes. Searching, desperate for information regarding parallel universes, any walls that might exist between them, crossing between them, the void – anything that might clue her in on how she could get back.

But every long, dark, lonely night yielded nothing.

Still she persevered in her course, knowing with any extra minute of free time during the day, her thoughts would be dragged back to that lost parallel universe, leaving her the empty shell she tried her hardest to pretend that she wasn’t for her family and coworkers. But some days the long hours got to her, like today, because that bloke Alan from downstairs was hassling her for a drink again (when she distinctly remembered turning him down twice already) and she snapped at him. Nearly everyone whose cubicle resided in a twenty-foot radius helped raise unceremonious, easily overheard gossip, too cowardly to approach her. Others got bold, and before she could stop them were confronting her as tactfully as they could probably manage, telling her Alan was a handsome bloke, asking if she’s alright, telling her to move on.

Move on. That’s what cut her the deepest, because she knew they were right. She should be moving on by now, or at least attempting to. Eight months had gone by and she was not a step closer to even wanting to move on, to even consider forgetting him, to even think about the kind of life that would stretch before her without him in it. God forbid falling for someone else.

She couldn’t sleep at night. She could hardly even rest her eyes for a minute from her glowing computer screen on late nights in the dim office building, because she closed her eyes and he was there. The backs of her eyelids were a constant, daunting white screen, projecting him in her mind.
whether or not she wanted to see him, whether she was prepared to see him. Sometimes he’d smile like he did when he saw her after they’d been apart for a time. Pull at his ear or rub absently behind his neck like he did when he was nervous. Ruffle a hand through that thick, brown hair, bespectacled face scrunching with concentration when something went wrong beneath a panel of the TARDIS. Sometimes he’d kiss her, his soft, warm lips brushing against hers and erasing all her worries before exploring other places, maybe her neck, her shoulders, her chest. Others she’d be beneath him, hot, sticky skin pressed against his as they made love, limbs intertwining with their minds as he moved inside her and pressed his lips to her neck between breathy sighs.

Those weak moments didn’t happen at work – they couldn’t, or she’d face breaking down in front of her coworkers. No, she staved those off, waited to surrender to the merciless ghosts of their time together when she laid down in her bed for the night. So many nights that apparition of his memory woke her from sleep in the early hours of the morning, and though she hated to still be crying over him, her lungs would heave and tears would stream down her cheeks until her stinging eyes were too tired to make any more and she’d fall unconscious again, only hoping to sleep dreamlessly the next time around.

It was unfair, to be separated like this. He was more than just a typical twenties fling: they made each other better, challenged each other, and they were connected. Was it selfish that was what she now missed the most – the intimate link between them? Even though that only lasted a small fraction of their lengthy relationship, it was the most meaningful to her and she craved it day after day; her heart longed for that deep intimacy, her mind had descended into a desolate loneliness without anyone to truly share it with. It was like an addiction: having a taste of a telepathic link was sealing the deal and there was no going back from it, she’d long for that feeling again for the rest of her life. It was a stab to the gut every time she thought it, but the Doctor was right all along to try to prevent that connection from ever forming, because this was so much worse than the first time she thought she lost him. It was something even her family couldn’t fathom or even begin to understand, and she never bothered trying to explain it. It was too beautiful for words to capture, what they shared too private to disclose.

Subconsciously, she’d chased after it for a time after a few months, hitting up local pubs late into the night before she’d started her futile mission to pursue her home universe. Would wind up snogging some bloke only to turn tail and bolt from him when it was only the tang of liquor and a bold tongue against hers, randy hands groping for a spot on her clothes, nothing more. She tried to delve deeper, to find any emotions hidden inside, but there was no psychic link to be formed, nothing of substance in the impetuous discharge of hormones, so she ran, time and time again.

Worst of all, she still felt like it was cheating, though she’d nearly resigned to the fact that she’d never be reunited with him, she felt revolting and traitorous each time. But her damned body was still human and even through the chronic emotional distress it screamed for a physical connection with someone. It was a twisted, paradoxical feeling, to have the painful throbbing emptiness left behind by a lost love worsened and tainted by the body’s carnal decision to disregard the heart, not care who provides the release.

But eventually, she’d been at the wrong bar at the wrong time, stumbling into some skinny bloke in a brown suit and glasses and she’d gotten in his cab and gone home with him. She struggled to fabricate an intimacy to the whole meaningless experience, imagined it was him inside her for a time, whispered his name through tears when she came. Moisture streamed down her face again as she stood and dressed as soon as he’d gone to the shower, walking without hesitation out of the stranger’s apartment and huddling her clothes close against her body, because she was more cold and alone after than before she walked into it.

It was just another thing for her to shed tears over as the months went on: the raging, duplicitous
guilt. So she’d given up looking for it, on any future satisfaction for her treacherous hormones, settled for spending nights in solitude on far more important matters. Taking care of baser needs herself in the privacy of her room only when absolutely necessary, when it could be him touching her in the confines of her mind.

Tonight was one of those nights. Not only for being exhausted, but for needing him more than ever, to relax in the peace of their emotional link, one without secrets and without judgment, to touch every inch of him while he touched every inch of her. So as she pulled the blanket over herself until it was snug against her chin, as her head sank deeper into the plush pillow under her, it was automatic that her hand trailed down her body and between her legs, driven by a desperate need to indulge herself in that fantasy. She was already falling into a state of semi-consciousness, sinking gladly into a dream that it was his fingers stroking inside her, his rough tongue against her clit as he tasted her.

She could almost feel his other hand on her bare thigh, almost get a grip on the way his mind would intertwine with hers as he carried her through her peak, encouragements and his inadvertent pleasure streaming to her, and it tipped her over the edge. Half-asleep, she stuffed the blanket over her mouth with her other hand to muffle her cries, fresh tears painting her cheeks from the sheer rush of emotion. In only seconds she was unconscious, drifting away to all she had left of him: her mind’s shreds, remnants of his arms tight and warm around her.

It felt like only seconds later she woke with a start, echoes of him whispering her name ringing in her ears. For a moment she forgot about all eight months of her time in this universe, looking about the bed and hoping to see him lying there next to her, about to ask him why he’d whispered her awake. Finding no one beside her, she looked lazily around her room regardless, though with each passing moment of continued loneliness reality struck again like a sack of bricks to her skull. It was a dream. She sat up, dumbfounded and heartbroken for a long moment when her name sounded from his lips again. It was soft but lacked clarity, resonating and fading in and out like echoes in a large cave, and she realized it was stupid to think he was ever in the room. She pinched her arm hard and gasped at the sudden surge of pain radiating up her bicep. Well, she was definitely awake. The third time she was listening intently for the source, but quickly found it ethereal and was unable to pinpoint its origin. The fourth she instead concentrated on shutting out the distractions in her room, closing her eyes and letting each letter of her name guide her to him, and that’s when she realized the whispers were coming from inside her mind.

A normal person might have thought she’d finally gone mad, after all the trauma and sulking and overworking herself. But she took a hesitant, if optimistic, guess at the truth: he’d found a way to communicate, perhaps even some way to come through the gap between the two universes. And he was calling her to him through whatever psychic link this was.

Flipping quickly over on her bed, her vision reluctantly focused on the clock: 5am. It was far too early in the morning to wake anyone else up. She rolled quickly out of bed and nearly ran from her room before she remembered she was wearing neither knickers nor her pajama bottoms. Slipping on the pajamas, she crossed her room again only to hear her name once more, and her feet shuffled faster through the doorway as her hands kneaded over her eyes before wiping anxiously down her face.

She shortly found herself in the kitchen, seeking out a cure for her exhaustion on the countertop. Shortly after her arrival in this universe the nudge of tea no longer sufficed to chase away the fatigue and red eyes, and she began to rely more and more on the kick of coffee most mornings to drag herself out of the house, to fuel for another sixteen-hour day. She mechanically scooped coffee grounds into their maker, the pleasantly bitter aroma not registering with her senses because her
thoughts dwelled in a different part of her mind, where her name was still repeated every few minutes. As the coffee pot boiled and popped rhythmically she sat in a chair at the table, starring out the back window at the stars still in the sky, no hint of sunrise yet on the horizon.

The voice had direction. She became sure of it as she sat alone in the moonlight streaming through the blinds, not even bothering to turn on the kitchen light. She poured her dose of caffeine and quickly returned to the table, sipping but not tasting the steaming, bitter remedy for her tired eyes as she watched the first strokes of purple and red color the black sky. A fierce hope in the deepest part of her heart fought to break free from the cage she immediately locked it in, fearing that hope would be dashed. That maybe she was insane after all, or this message was nothing but a failed attempt to come through properly.

But his voice lit a fire inside her, was a light in the darkness she’d persisted in for so many months, and she was afraid she wouldn’t be able to stop her hopes from hiking up regardless. A thousand possibilities splayed out before her but she kept coming back to the one at the top of the stack of her hopes: seeing him again. She kicked the chair across from hers forcefully, watching with alarm as it slid back along the wood floor and banged into the nearest wall. Standing instantly to check the wall for a dent or crack, she exhaled in relief when she found none and inwardly cursed her tendency to anger and lack of self-control.

But a physical manifestation was the least damaging thing she could have done, she rationed. The emotions closing in on her were too much to handle: confusion at what it all meant, a painful hesitance to follow the voice for fear of it leading nowhere, a glimmering hope only darkened by a strong instinct to forbid herself from daring to trust it, to instead squash the hope before she injured her already damaged heart even more.

The crimsons and purples of the dawn transformed to dark oranges and maroons, which then gave way to the bright pinks and tangerines of morning until the yellow of the sun finally came into view, brightness still awakening against a dimly blue sky. She had hardly moved for the last hour and a half, and was startled when her mum walked into the kitchen.

“Mum!”

“Rose!” They shouted each other’s names in unison at the shock of seeing each other unexpectedly.

“Mum, is anyone else up?” she asked, eager to sit down and talk with everyone at once.

“What? Why? What are you doin’ up so early? It’s Saturday.” She resigned her tone to before-coffee volume, whispering her confusion foggily as she rubbed at her eyes. Her hair was the same light blonde mess she was sure hers still was at the moment, and she smiled a little, calmed by the bit of familiarity, a normal reminder in the chaotic morning. Well, she supposed the chaos was only in her head. To anyone else the morning was likely quiet as ever.

“Couldn’t sleep,” she summarized briefly. It was the truth, just with major details exempt. “Is dad up?”

“Yeah, he’ll be out in a mo’ I’m sure. He went to the loo. Mickey, though, he’s another story.” She waved her hand to indicate that Mickey would never be awake at close to seven in the morning on a weekend. She walked to the counter where the coffee pot was still half full.

“You just make this?” she asked.

“Yeah. It just beeped off about ten minutes ago, should still be hot.” Her mum just nodded as she grabbed a mug from the nearest cabinet. “Look, mum, I need to talk to you about something… well,
to everyone actually. Something’s happened.” She just got on with it, knowing if she couldn’t trust her mum with this, she couldn’t trust anyone, and needing at least some solace that she could confide her anxiety in someone.

“What, what’s happened, sweetheart? Are you alright?” Whipping around, she was suddenly all anxiety and concern, forehead creasing, eyes regaining their alertness in an instant as she walked back in her direction.

“Yeah, ‘m… fine. Just… want to see what everyone thinks about something. I’m gonna go wake Mickey up.”

“You sure?” she barely heard her mum ask as she fled from the room, the chair skidding on the floor behind her as she walked briskly down the hall to Mickey’s sometimes-bedroom. He only stayed there on occasion, usually when Rose asked for his company. It’d been a terribly long week at work and this was one of those Fridays when she sent him a text that morning, wondering if he’d come over for the weekend. He’d been asleep already when she got home, unsurprisingly. He worked just as hard at Torchwood, though she rarely saw him at work as he was on a different floor and she never bothered with actually taking her lunch hour.

The door creaked as it swung slowly open and she cringed but it didn’t stop her. Peeking quickly to make sure he was either clothed or covered by a blanket, she found him decent and crept over to the bed. Sound asleep, lightly snoring, mouth hanging open against the pillow, it looked like he was having a good night’s sleep, something she’d pined after for months, and she nearly turned around to leave out of reluctance to wake him. But this was important, and she trusted he would see that and not hold a grudge for a couple hours of lost slumber.

It only took three taps on his shoulder to elicit a frustrated and sleepy groan, and for her to whisper a quiet plea of ‘Mickey, wake up, ‘s important’ to slowly coax his eyes open as he barely nodded his acquiescence. He knew quite well how fragile she still was and was always prepared for her to ask him for help or reassurance, to be a shoulder to lean on when she needed it.

Once everyone was at least awake enough that their eyelids weren’t drooping, she gathered them all in the common room, and as there was still a chill of night in the air Pete started up the gas fireplace. To crackling and steady waves of heat from behind her chair, she just spilled everything, watching the orange lights dance on their faces to calm her nerves. Her name in the dream, the way it was still sounding in her mind even then (and this confirmed her theory because none of the others could hear a thing).

“He was callin’ me. I think… he’s callin’ me somewhere, and I’m gonna go. I was wonderin’ if any of you’d come with me.” She finished with a plea.

Her mum didn’t try to talk her out of it. Mickey didn’t give her one of those looks like she was about to do something stupid. Her dad didn’t look over to Jackie with wordless judgments about her mental state. Instead, they all agreed to come along with her, trusting her or trusting the Doctor and what he could do, maybe a bit of both. Pete offered to drive his jeep since they could all pile in it better and they were planning to leave that night before she knew it, as he had to go into work for a few hours during the day. She didn’t get overly anxious waiting, though, as they needed time to get packed up; who knew how long a drive this would turn out to be.

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France. Belgium.

They drove, hundreds of miles, underneath and over bodies of water and across countries. Taking
forks in the road and lengthy tunnels, crossing freeways, crossing bridges based only on her word that the voice was coming from ‘that direction.’ God, she hoped it was right. She tried not to let herself dare to hope too strongly for what was going to come of this excursion, but her heart quickly failed her. Hours and hours they spent crumpled in the jeep, crawling over unfamiliar, empty roads, her parents and Mickey being almost too supportive, outwardly showing no signs to frustration, but she knew inside they must have grown tired of staring out the windows as they helplessly waited for another of her dubious signals.

Germany. Denmark.

It wasn’t the sort of road trip with sing-a-longs and driving games and casual conversation; everyone in the car could read the anxiety on her face and most of them didn’t bother talking much at all, except to ask if there was any change in the voice or how much farther she thought it’d be. Mickey had one of his earbuds in half the time and her mum was reading a book, while her dad had some talk radio station on only the front speakers so she could hardly even make out what they were saying.


So she settled into her seat, nodding off every couple hours only to be woken quickly by the Doctor, so to speak. And with every ghost of her name from his lips her stomach dropped further, her mind came closer to caving in on itself; she never thought she’d see the Doctor again and had all but forbidden herself from thinking about him finding her first. But she didn’t know what she’d do now if he wasn’t waiting for her there when they arrived. Somehow she’d begun to hope too much, without really allowing or realizing it.

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Their route ended on a beach, and Rose only hoped it was far enough, not that she wouldn’t swim until her arms gave out or she froze to death if it meant getting to see him one last time. But the voice had stopped as soon as they got out of the Jeep, the others stretching and groaning while she scanned anxiously around the damp, rocky sand. A freezing wind blew her hair over her face no matter how she tried to walk away from it and chilled her even through her layers of clothes – it seemed to be coming from all directions at once. It was just after sunrise, but the pinks and oranges of the sun were hazed by the overcast sky, just a faint yellowish glow trickling from across the gray water where the sun rose behind the clouds.

It seemed like hours she ambled through the squishy sand, water soaking through her shoes making her feet lose all feeling, breeze nipping at her cheeks. Hours that she scoured the horizon, ambled over rocks to check for caves and hidden outcoves, waiting for the ripping sound of the TARDIS or the Doctor’s voice calling her name again. And it might have been hours, or it might have been ten minutes that she waited, her heart crashing against her chest as hope dwindled with each second, threatening to stop its beating if he didn’t appear. Her eyes were stinging with the chilled air and brimming with stifled tears as she stared out into the water again, exhaustion threatening to collapse her knees when she saw a new shade of brown out of the corner of her eye.

Her breath caught as she turned and took in the sight, pinstripes and chucks and artfully ruffled hair, but her heart didn’t leap for joy beneath her ribs; it only sank, because he wasn’t here, not really. The sand and rocks and gentle waves were visible straight through his face, his clothes, his hands – like a ghost. She stared for a moment at his translucent face, his weak smile a poorly constructed mask over the sorrow and pain clear in his eyes, and wondered briefly if that wasn’t the truth: that this was nothing but a ghost emanating from her anguished subconscious.

“Where are you?” she asked shakily, voice threatening to betray her with sobs.
“Inside the TARDIS,” he answered immediately. She couldn’t see any part of the TARDIS around him or hear its characteristic whooshing: wherever the TARDIS was, it wasn’t close to here, and the sudden enlightenment carved out her chest even more hollow than before. “There’s one tiny little gap in the universe left, just about to close. And it takes an awful lot of power to send this projection – I’m in orbit around a supernova. I’m burning up a sun just to say goodbye.” Her lungs constricted as her heart slowed to barely keeping her alive – it was what she feared the most since she woke up two mornings before. Foolishly she’d hoped he’d be here properly, not just a lousy faded projection to tell her goodbye, like it was going to do her any good if he’d disappear again and leave her more broken than before. And she hated herself for hoping, now, for allowing that frailty to trickle into her heart.

“You look like a ghost.”

“Hold on.” He grabbed the sonic from his pocket, twisting the switch and pointing it at thin air with focused precision somewhere to her left. As he tucked the sonic away back in his trousers, the browns of his suit and the peaches of his skin saturated with color, his image solidified, transforming his shape from ethereal to tangible before her eyes. Slowly her feet trudged through the sand to carry her closer, hoping with all her soul that this ‘projection’ was special, that he had some semblance of physical form despite the logic that said he couldn’t. Stopping only a foot from him she reached out her hand, automatically reaching for his face, to cradle his cheek, feel its warmth under her palm, comfort him while comforting herself.

“Can I t – ” she hardly started her plea before he interrupted.

“I’m still just an image. No touch.” He shook his head and it was like dumping ice water over her head.

“Can’t you come through properly?”

“The whole thing would fracture. Two universes would collapse.”

“So?” She was joking, of course, but then, she wasn’t. She struggled to keep from completely breaking down right then, at the thought that if the situation was reversed she may not be able to have such restraint. Would she risk the safety of two universes to be with him again, properly and completely? She hoped she wouldn’t, but her heart was aching for him, her hands twitching with longing to touch him, severely craving to rebuild the connection her mind was starving for in that moment and every moment since they’d lost it.

That’s what it would take, according to the Doctor, to get back to one another: two universes falling apart around them. She was ashamed to think it might be worth it and worried her voice would stop working at any moment but the Doctor just chuckled, not understanding any truth behind the word, and she tried to chuckle too but it came out anxious – a breathy, humorless sound that only made her more on edge.

“Where are we? Where did the gap come out?” he asked, scanning quickly around the beach but seeming to see no indications of an answer.

“We’re in Norway.”

“Norway, right.” He nodded, but there was no real recognition, just his false pretense of understanding when he wanted to keep the illusion he was already up to speed.

“About fifty miles out of Bergen. It’s called Darlig Ulv Stranden.”
“Dalek?”

“Darlig. It’s Norwegian for ‘bad.’ This translates as Bad Wolf Bay.” He smiled, and it was almost genuine, pearly teeth showing through as he considered what she thought was only horrific irony. They were quiet for too many seconds and inside she realized she should be panicking that any moment could be their last.

“How long have we got?” Her voice cracked and betrayed her again.

“About two minutes.” His voice was soft, his tone somber. Two minutes. The words were like iron in her gut, weighing her down, heavy and threatening.

“Can we at least pretend you’re really here?” She stepped closer, her hand reaching for him again instinctively. He didn’t answer, just swallowed hard and furrowed his brow further, knowing exactly what she was after and that it was futile but not wanting to hurt her further. And that knowledge was there in her mind too, warning her of the pain, but she couldn’t stop herself.

Stepping closer, she locked onto his soft brown eyes, blinking away tears until his face became clear. His head was angled down to meet her eyes and she only had to reach on her toes a bit to reach his lips and without too much thought, she did. Slowly reaching up, she ignored the way he whispered her name to caution her against it, knowing it wouldn’t be what she wanted, and she couldn’t remember if she begged out loud or if it was only in her head. He surrendered, though, when she wouldn’t give up, head tilting to the side and leaning down to meet her the last inch or two so slowly it was almost painful.

She hovered over his lips, though they were slightly parted there was no warmth radiating from them, no puff of his breath against her mouth. Meeting his eyes a final time, only to find regret and anguish in them she was sure reflected them back to him, she closed her eyes altogether, leaning forward the last inch. Where warm flesh should have been there was only nippy air, where the taste of him should have lingered on her tongue there was only the salt of the sea, where her lips should have covered his they instead closed over nothing, chapping only with the wind instead of the brushes of his. The Doctor was right, of course. It was worse this way; she couldn’t even pretend despite how she squeezed her eyes closed and tried to feel him there – his body wasn’t with her, or his mind. Just an image, a voice.

She pulled away quickly, reversing the step she’d taken towards him and covering her mouth with the sleeve of her jacket, eyes still closed in shame, in embarrassment, in agony. She finally opened them to find him staring at her, eyebrows pulled together in anger though his eyes only held concern. It was fitting, of course, and they both knew it. For so long they’d staved off from an intimate relationship, and in their final minutes they were being denied any form of touch altogether. Cruelly they were dangled in front of each other but forbidden from the warmth and security of physical contact, serving only as a bitter, caustic reminder of the years they’d done it to themselves – the universe’s just punishment.

“I can’t think of what to say.” It was almost a sob the way it came squeaking from her throat. Less than two minutes now to say goodbye and she had no idea how. She wanted him to do the talking, to fill the space with the soothing voice that had calmed her and babbled to her and lulled her to sleep on so many occasions. But his usual gob didn’t seem to be working, either, and he went with something obvious, something she didn’t even want to talk about.

“So you’ve still got Mr. Mickey, then?” he nudged his head in the direction of her family.

“There’s five of us now. Mum, dad, Mickey, and the baby.” His eyes widened, mouth hung open in astonishment.
“You’re not…?” His unasked question hung in the whipping air between them.

“No,” she laughed. Did he really think she would be? She shuddered to think of why, if he thought she’d gone back to Mickey or something worse, but brushed it off. “It’s mum. She’s three months gone. More Tylers on the way.”

“And what about you? Are you…”

“Yeah, ’m back workin’ in the shop.”

“Oh – good for you.” His lie was painfully obvious – his jaw tight, lacking a smile and his eyes far from genuine, instead there was a subtle disappointment, another taste of regret. And she was glad he at least tried for some decorum in the face of their impossible situation but it was too much to let him believe – that the life he’d saved her from was what she’d gone immediately back to when she lost him. He’d changed her more than that: she was better than that now, could handle more.

“Shut up, no I’m not. There’s still a Torchwood on this planet, ’s open for business. Think I know a thing or two about aliens.” His real smile broke out across his face.

“Rose Tyler, defender of the Earth.” Coupled with the genuine smile were increasingly red eyes and a newly cracking voice, and his brief falter in composure made hers even shakier than before. Her bottom lip quivered as she took him in, fearing any moment he could be gone. She was no good at counting seconds and hadn’t a clue when their two minutes were up, when she’d look her last on those chocolate eyes, those full pink lips, soft and playful brown hair, the almost too-skinny pinstripes.

“You’re dead, officially, back home. So many people died that day, and you’ve gone missing. You’re on a list of the dead.” Well, here it was, as she should have expected, the Doctor being the cold alien he could be. There was almost furious concentration in his stare now as he explained something she’d much rather not hear, and her precariously held back sorrow was pushing to the surface, writing itself on her face with flushed cheeks, wet eyes, a tight-lipped smile of misery.

“Here you are, living a life day after day. The one adventure I can never have.” She covered her gloved hand over her mouth, doing her best to hide her sobs as he went on, slowly killing her. She thought he must have had logic for saying it, that he was trying to tell her this was better. That she was better off here, alive and with her family though separated from him, than back in his universe, nothing but a ghost to give her name on that list validity. But she wasn’t having any of it, not now. It wasn’t what she wanted with her last moments with the Doctor.

“Am I ever gonna see you again?” It was gasps and cries, yelps of her vocal cords that somehow managed the syllables.

“You can’t.” It was certain, resolute as he shook his head only once. Somehow, she already knew his answer, but hearing him say it was worse than she imagined, another shovel digging at the hole in her chest as she covered her eyes with her hands. Even through her sniffling and heaving breaths, the tears now cascading down her wind-chapped cheeks, she still took notice her blatant sorrow was thoroughly unrequited from the Doctor, and it stung, poured acid over fresh wounds. She figured she’d keep talking, a sorry attempt to cover over the emotions she wore on her sleeve that she wished she could suppress and conceal until he was gone.

“Then what are you gonna do?” Her question shared a breath with a sob.

“Oh, I’ve got the TARDIS. Same old life, last of the Time Lords.” Still he didn’t yield to anything except a reluctant, unconvincing smile, his eyes wary and moisture-free, his voice hardly affected the
way hers was.

“On your own?” He only nodded, pouting his lip slightly, jaw clenching in the first indication he wasn’t happy with the answer. It wasn’t like she thought he was truly unaffected by their farewell, worsened exponentially with a crunch for time. This was just how he handled things, stuffed them down to protect himself, only shared the intimate feelings when the time was right, when it was necessary or when there was no barrier between them. There was an infinite barrier between them now, threatening to sever the paltry link between them for good at any moment. It certainly wasn’t a moment the Doctor would give in to or reveal the depth of his emotions, and she accepted that. But she couldn’t do the same. Something important clawed at the front of her mind and she had to tell him, even though she was convinced he already knew, that he’d learned it at the very latest when their minds were bonded in intimacy.

After all this time with him, she’d never told him the words, those three words she was thinking since only a few months after traveling with him, words she’d seared into his mind and hearts when they became connected but never really said. They struggled on their way out, catching in her throat and on her tongue the first time but she managed, through another cry she told him the most important thing she ever could.

“I love you.”

He was quiet for a moment, processing the short number of syllables for too long in their restricted pressure of racing seconds.

“Quite right, too.” He smiled lightly. Of course, she knew it came as no surprise. But it was important that she told him anyway, just in case, and she couldn’t think of anything better for her last words to him. She only desperately wanted to hear them back though she doubted he would say them; despite how she loved him, she knew he struggled to label his feelings towards her, or towards anything in his life. In moments when it really mattered, when there was a high level of stress or danger involved, the Doctor could turn these things off and attempt to lighten the mood with a casual, joking response. Exposed and more vulnerable than ever, she prayed just this once he could be different, could give her what she wanted even though it was selfish to expect it.

“And I suppose… if it’s my last chance to say it…” Oh, God. He was taking up too much time, drawing out this sentence too long, and she should have known it would happen. It was more of their horrendous luck.

He said her name, and he was gone. He might have been prepared to answer her prayers, but she’d never know, not now. His lifelike form rapidly faded back to a ghost, to a whisper, then to nothing. Oh, this was just bloody fitting, too, wasn’t it? Someone who’s supposed to be a god of time stabbed in the back by it, completely under its cruel mercy the same as she was. This was even worse than the first time she was left here, because now she knew a life without him, the emptiness and monotony of it. And he had given her hope and his smile and his voice and then taken it away, left her with only more of the same life to look forward to. Denied her the things she craved the most – the soothing touch of his hands, the loving tendrils of his mind reassuring her, proper English words to tell her how he was feeling after all this time.

The vast expanse of the cold, abandoned beach spread out before her and it all came crashing down, the realized fears and the full weight of what had happened. His intentions might have been purely to respect and comfort her with his goodbye; he mustn’t have known the non-corporeal nature of his visit would only inflict a fresh wave of pain, that an insistent Time Lord authority would only cement her doubts that she’d ever be reunited with him. She turned around to the only person who might understand, and ran the distance to her mum before her legs gave out and she fell against her frame,
soaking tears in her shirt and struggling contain her lamentations from burdening her ears.

It took all three of them to tow her away from the empty, forsaken beach, her feet unwilling to leave the ground where he might reappear if she waited long enough. She gave in to their gentle convincing and tugging after only an hour because it was no use – he was gone. Her mum sat in the backseat with her as they started the mercilessly long journey home, holding her as much in her arms as she could and even letting a few tears fall herself until Rose fell into a tortured and turbulent sleep, plagued with nightmares of chasing after the wisps of the Doctor’s projection but unable to grip onto his jacket, threatened by a lifetime alone waiting for a second chance at a psychic soul mate that would never come.

She woke with a start to a peal of thunder and flashes of light, rain pounding rhythmically on the roof and pouring down the windows furiously. She might have laughed at the irony if she had any strength to feel anything, instead just stared out the window at the dreary, blurry greens and grays of the landscape as the water streamed down the glass, listening to the squeak of the windshield wipers as a distraction from her mind. Her mum had put a blanket over her and she pulled it up, curling her legs up into the seat and rolling into a ball beneath it as she tried to empty her mind of any thoughts at all.

It worked for a few minutes but in the end it was a fruitless effort, but somehow the insistence of her grief brought her strength even in that moment of hopelessness. She’d never stop missing him, never stop thinking of him and how he was coping alone in the other universe, and she’d never meet anyone else like him. She might as well put the energy to good use. The storm lasted over an hour, soaking the plants and slickening the road but the tears in her eyes and on her cheeks dried as she solidified her resolve: she wasn’t giving up. The Doctor thought it was impossible but he always was a stubborn, old man. Rules could be broken. Maybe this universe was different. There had to be a loophole – he once said himself the Time Lords could travel easily between universes and she was just headstrong enough to believe she could, too. Torchwood’s resources would still be waiting for her when they arrived home, and she was going to find her way back to him, if it was the last thing she ever did.
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Longest update you'll see. This chapter really ran me into the ground, it was a major challenge both to write and to revise. The length, though, I feel is necessary for immersion into this difficult interim. Feel free to split it up however you like; several breaks make that quite doable. Many thanks to Lisa for the feedback, and Amber for the extensive moral support.

He’d been distant, emotionless, and objective where he strove for sincere and affectionate. Everything he intended to convey left his mouth worse than he’d planned them out, and the most important thing not even spoken at all. When she gazed at him miserably through her own tears, holding out her own heart, waiting for him to return the phrase, and he failed her when their time was really, truly running out.

Just three little words. He always imagined how lovely they’d sound forming on her tongue, leaving her lips and blessing his ears, sparking yet another light inside him on the day she decided to say them aloud. But the way they were engraved into his mind only moments before was something else entirely. The second word catching in her throat, the desperation in her shaking voice, the hopeless sobs cutting through the air and playing out across her face that made his hearts shatter in his chest… they nearly destroyed him. Still, as he stood alone in the TARDIS, the images and sounds were corroding him from the inside, slowly eating away at the strength and hope he’d taken so long to resurrect with Rose.

The time. The time. Why hadn’t he kept better track of the time? His subconscious clock had glitched, swirling into a hodgepodge of senseless numbers as he watched her struggle to speak, as he listened to her offer up her heart to him for the last time, as their seconds ticked away. On instinct, his tongue was poised to speak in Gallifreyan, to convey a more accurate image of his affections, and he hesitated, remembering that’s not what she’d be after in their last moments. The English words, somehow, were harder to say, frozen on his tongue for a second too long.

He meant for it to be a helpful visit, a much-needed goodbye, to say their last, to mend their tattered patchwork of memories and begin to heal. Stupid of him to think this would help either of them, of course it hadn’t. Rather done the opposite. He had never seen Rose so upset in his life, not when Mickey left or when she held her dying father in her arms; it was a sight he never wanted to witness but was now seared onto the backs of his eyelids. She probably wished now she’d never even met him; maybe then she wouldn’t have been banished to an alternate universe, pointlessly missing him.

That feeling of emptiness in his mind, the ache in his chest from severing a telepathic link like theirs, even the newly formed fledgling it was… he knew she’d be feeling it too. Those self-deprecating tendencies were creeping up on him again: he was cursing himself for allowing it to happen. Despite the overwhelming release and contentment it brought him to share it with her, he’d was right all along to protect her from the pain of losing a connection like that. But never in his worst nightmares would their time have ended so soon. He had experience with this, but Rose, she’d never dealt with anything like it, something so outside the realm of the human experience that it was indescribable to another person, even her mum, Mickey, anyone she wanted to tell. How would she be able to handle it?
No, he had to stop this, this underestimating her, cheapening her to some archaic notion of a pathetic, dependent woman. She was nothing of the sort. Her body was strong and her mind even stronger. She certainly didn’t need him, the idiot that was somehow incapable of telling her he loved her. She was with her family, even her dad and Mickey, who she thought were lost to her forever, and she’d pull through. Be safe. She’d even have a new sibling to help take care of soon, that would keep her busy enough, along with her job at Torchwood. He swelled with pride again at the thought – Rose Tyler, Defender of the Earth. A fitting title for a determined and capable woman. Maybe she’d find some bloke. Someone worthy of her affections could give her everything she wanted and more; well, except maybe the stars.

The console suddenly clouded with red, his entire body shuddering with sudden ferocious rejection of the ideas filling his mind: some randy twenty-something sweeping her off her feet with a nice suit and chocolates… flirting with her, kissing her, holding her, making her say his name when she came... He dragged his hands down his face, soaking up lingering moisture and doing his best to drive away the unbidden thoughts from his mind. Jealousy also happened to be on the list of things he wasn’t allowing himself to feel at the moment. He had to keep it together. She deserved to be happy, and if that came from some other bloke, then so be it. He won’t be able to make his sort of connection, at least. Hard as he tries, he thought bitterly, a surge of selfish, carnal pride taking him for a moment. But he brushed those sentiments away, too, meandering to the consol and resigning to take her into the vortex for a few days.

He was interrupted, however, by a fire-haired, very angry woman in a wedding dress standing near the door.

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“Her name was Rose,” he answered shakily before retreating behind the door.

He thought about staying in that flooding warehouse with the red arachnid mistress and just letting the water take him – he really, really thought about it.

Donna had snapped him out of it, and for that he was grateful, in spite of it all, even asked her to tag along with him. She had a sort of natural intuition that made her question him, see right through his facades and callous exterior, challenge while encouraging him. Maybe it was because she’d started to care for him, even after knowing him scarcely a day, making fun of his ship and his name and his thin frame. But she had to go and ask the worst question she could have.

Falling back against the thick white wood, he pushed his thumb and index finger over his eyes, smearing the hot moisture starting to rim the edges before it could overflow. With a deep, uneven breath, his hand fell back against the door with him as he stared at the console, his lungs constricting at one particular name carved in Gallifreyan above the rotor.

Rose. The syllable echoed in his mind as he closed his eyes again, slumping against the door until he hit the ground and stretched his legs in front of him, resting his head back against the door. If there ever was a time he wished fiercely for the Time Lords to be around, it was now. By himself, he was certain it was impossible to break the seals between the universes, allow travel between them even for himself, let alone the entire multiverse, and he risked the welfare of both if he so much as tried.

Pulling his knees up to his chest, he sunk his head, massaging the heels of his hands over his eyes as he considered. He wanted her back. More than he’d ever wanted someone back. It only became clear to him today that he was a danger to himself to be out of the TARDIS on his own, without her, his inspiration for good.

“Find someone,” Donna had said. “Because sometimes I think you need someone to stop you.”
Of course, he acted like he didn’t care about heeding her ill-timed advice, but sitting here now, it still rang through his head. He didn’t need anyone, he was technically honest about that. He needed *Rose*, specifically. Their tearful, debacle of a goodbye was a fresh stab to the gut each time he thought of it: it was never how he wanted her to tell him she loved him, nerves aflame with their impending separation, desperate cries sharing the air with her words.

He growled hopelessly as he jumped to his feet, incoherent sounds forming in no particular language as he sped over to the console, throwing the switch to take her into the vortex as he kicked hard against the grating beneath. It was too violent and she resented his carelessness, thrusting them into the air quite suddenly and knocking him from his feet.

“Sorry,” he groaned as his eyes burned again, both with a throbbing set of toes on his right foot and the rising anger at the universe for taking Rose from him.

“It’s not your fault.” More delicately, he stood and steadied the controls until they were safely floating in nowhere. “I just miss her. So much.” Stroking a few fingers along the coral edging of the console, a tear fell unbidden onto a switch before he could catch it. Should he ask permission, get her blessing for what he was about to do? No. He knew what she’d say, weeping or not.

“I’m sorry, girl.” Wiping another bit of moisture from his cheek before it could stain the dry console, he turned away, shooting down the hall like a bullet destined for the library. “I’ve got to at least try!” The Time Lords weren’t gone – he was here. Maybe there was still a chance the space between the worlds could be navigated. It’s the only way he could function, he thought: to dedicate this negative energy to the project. Project Get Rose Tyler Back. He liked the sound of it.

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It may have been that she was still a bit dead on her feet, her mind still jumbled and heart struggling to function after the unexpected but transient visit from the Doctor; perhaps she was just stubborn, to insist on figuring everything out on her own. But twenty-eight days had passed, wasting hours away scouring records for this world’s version of Jack Harkness, if he even existed, trying to get her old mobile to work, and researching supernovas without any real forward thinking. She finally admitted it to herself how stupid she was being: she’d be stuck forever if she didn’t recruit the people around her.

Jake, ever the pragmatist, reacted like she expected.

“He said it rips a hole in the universe, Rose. This whole world was gonna burn from the damage o’those discs, the ice caps were meltin’ and everythin’! An’ besides, they don’t even work, not anymore!” He softened a bit, seeing the pained resignation in her face. “Rose, I know you’re hurtin’ right now, but it’s not worth puttin’ the world in danger tryin’ to cross again. I’m sorry.” Smiling lightly with a hand on her shoulder, he proceeded to ask her to come have a drink with the mates that night, to ‘take her mind off of things.’ He meant well, Jake. Always did. But his objective logic wasn’t what she needed, and she wasn’t about to start an argument with him, hotheaded as he was.

Over a cuppa and a handful of his favorite pastries, she brought it up with Mickey that weekend.

“Honestly, Rose, I’ve been waitin’ for you t’ask me for help. ‘M not gonna help you destroy the universe, though.” Her face fell as she stared into her steaming mug, quickly losing faith in her new plan. “But y’know what?” Her head peeked up to look at him, finding a smug grin on his face. “Sometimes the Doctor’s wrong.” His hand reached for hers from across the table, and just like that, he’d agreed to help her find a way, the care and confidence in his eyes rekindling her own resolve.

“Sides, it’s not like you t’give up, is it?”
Neither of them ever did mention it to Jake again.

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He scoured every book in the library, tossing the millennia-old copies across the room and feeling a rush of superficial pleasure each time he heard a binding snap or fragile pages scatter across the wood floor. Far as the texts seemed to be concerned, initiating travel between parallel worlds in the first place required technology and facilities from Gallifrey he simply didn’t have access to. That, and the rest of his people. Hundreds of Time Lords used to be appointed to keep a close eye on the stability of universes, keeping the Voidstuff in the Void where it belonged, preventing abuse of travel. He couldn’t do it on his own.

The more that truth sank in, the more hopeless and depraved he became, pacing anxiously back and forth with ancient books smearing dust into his fingers. His hair stuck out aggressively in all directions, all the carefully applied product from his meeting with Rose kneaded away by his fidgety hands. His anger generated too much body heat, and gradually his coat and tie were abandoned to the floor, his oxford pulled from his trousers and several buttons released at his neck, his Chucks kicked off.

It was a full three days, he realized, he’d gone without a drop to drink or a morsel of food, the slightest tick of sleep. Better at humans though he was at sustaining himself for long periods, his parched throat was now incessantly demanding rehydration in a way he couldn’t easily ignore. Silently messaging the TARDIS for a drink, he turned from the towering shelves and dragged his feet to the nearest couch, tumbling over the back of it until he collapsed on the cushions.

It was bliss to seal his aching, stinging eyes closed with his fingers as he tried to channel his energy into redirecting blood flow to mend the strain. Without focusing his efforts to keep his thoughts in line, his head was quickly swimming, contrasting images of the last time he made love to Rose and the last memory he had of her face, contorted with tears and pain, flooding his synapses in a painful juxtaposition. Perhaps his subconscious was keeping his eyes pried open to prevent these types of thoughts.

Sliding his hands down his face, he wrenched his eyes open to find a tall glass of water perched on the table beside the couch. He let the sensation of the tiny molecules quenching his thirst, instantly hydrating the lining of his mouth, take over rather than continue down his line of thought. He managed not to toss the glass across the room, though he wanted to see it fracture and shatter, hear the crack against the wall and the raining of shards onto the floor. Looking around, though, the sight of gnarled pages and torn bindings across the room suppressed the urge, and he gently set the empty glass back on the table as guilt swelled. If he couldn’t learn to control himself, he’d end up destroying the entire ship. When did he lose his respect for everything the TARDIS kept safe for him?

“I can’t do this,” he whispered, shaking his head in resignation to the empty room.

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Whatever Jake and his team used before wouldn’t work, she knew that much. She and Mickey managed to track down every member of the R&D team that had developed the dimension-hopping discs, a fair number of them agreeing to resume work on a similar project despite the risks, after they were promised a raise (unbeknownst to her superiors, of course). Some of the more Type-A researchers still remembered the warning Jake had relayed from the Doctor. With them, though, she was able to write off her bringing up the topic as mere curiosity, and had them reassigned to different labs than the one the new team would be working in.
A few weeks were spent simply shifting budgets and covering their tracks, digging up old records she wished she’d had access to in the five months she tried rediscovering the key to inter-universe travel by herself. In spite of lying to half her coworkers and not mentioning a word to Jackie or Pete, she couldn’t bring herself to feel guilt: just overwhelming excitement and a renewed sense of purpose.

The inherent problem was that there were no openings through which to jump. Popping down to the lab for ‘loo’ and ‘lunch’ breaks, she was often only reminded that in order to design something capable of achieving the manner of travel they needed, it would have to be modified with the capacity to blow a hole in space-time and repair the wound behind itself. Not exactly the easiest news to bring back to her desk upstairs without letting on to the entire floor.

“It can’t be done, ma’am,” one of her most trusted physics experts, Martin, claimed one evening that they’d planned a meeting one-on-one after most of the others had headed home. “Not without risking something terrible happening.”

“Look, just keep workin’, alright? You’ll think of somethin’, an’… I can help.”

“You? How? You’ve got a full-time gig upstairs already.”

“Well, how d’you feel about workin’ nights instead?” She ventured, when she caught a glimpse of someone out of the corner of her eye, and turned just in time to see Ron, a skittish and painfully awkward electrical engineer poking his head through the door. She often thought he looked skeptical about the project, and he didn’t talk much about his opinions either way, but they definitely needed his expertise so she didn’t let herself worry. But the bloke looked positively mortified.

“How long’ve you been standin’ there?” she called, irritation bubbling up in her tone instantly. He turned tail and ran from the lab without a word, and though she followed him with quick strides, he was out of sight once she reached the hall.

Of course, next morning she got a call from her dad, all condescending and shouting and calling off the project, temporarily revoking her authority over R&D until they had a proper talk at home that night. She knew it wasn’t that he didn’t trust or, or didn’t want her to be happy. He was there at Canary Wharf, simple as that. But his logical reaction didn’t stop her from needing an emergency trip to her car, weeks of frustration and hopelessness finally breaking as she pounded her fists on her steering wheel, accidentally blaring the horn a few times as hot, angry tears rolled down her cheeks.

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Only breaking periodically to fetch a banana sandwich or some more water, he wasted days away in the lab, trying to formulate a plan to defy the laws of the universe without the help of the Time Lords, scrawling and erasing messy calculations on his whiteboard, keeping a record of theorized failures in a journal on his desk. About two weeks in, he couldn’t put off a trip to the loo any longer; he could only slow the rate of his metabolism for so long. The man looking back at him in the mirror in his en suite startled him more than he expected.

Seeing smooth skin roughened with shadowy stubble, he raised a hand to his face, the prickly texture strange and unfamiliar against his palm but confirming it wasn’t some apparition. Light bruises rimmed his eyes, skin tone even more pale than usual, freckles in stark contrast to the light hue, hair completely lifeless and dull. His shoulders slumped, his shirt was wrinkled and stained with dust and ink and every spread he’d put on a sandwich in fourteen days. He looked like hell.

A shower, and a quick lie-down would do him some good, he reckoned. That, and a shave was all he needed. He’d be alright.
It certainly helped, putting on fresh trousers and a change of shirt. And it was almost cathartic scraping the scruff from his face, feeling it smooth and unblemished beneath his fingers once more as the cream disappeared. Brought him a sense of comfort, of normality. But deep down he just felt old. A carcass, a decomposing skeleton of the man he was weeks before. If no longer for Rose, who was this surprisingly youthful form really for? The lean, agile limbs, very touchable hair, unblemished skin, the life in his brown eyes – what use were any of they to him now? He’d be better off just regenerating now, reverting to the man he was before he met her, or someone like him. Maybe someone with tougher heartstrings, a man who wasn’t so vulnerable to stupid human things like love, someone unattractive who no human would ever fall for again.

Well, brilliant. His eyes reflected back at him pink and glossy again. When did he become so fucking fragile.

*When you changed for her,* a faint voice in his head sounded, rebuking his self-hatred.

A lie-down. He just needed a rest, a quick one to reset the synapses, refresh the mind.

Seventy minutes was all his brain allowed him before it shifted from cellular repair to overloading his mind with dreams of his arms wrapped around Rose, and his subconscious pulled him from sleep instantly, shying away from the pain even in slumber. His hands clenched around nothing as he woke with a start on his cold, empty bed, that hollow in his chest pulling apart again as alertness and realization slowly returned to him. He couldn’t go back to that lab, not right now. Deciding he could do with some fresh air and friendly faces, he rolled off his bed planning to head to Earth. Perhaps he’d fine some reassurance there, or be able to help someone, if nothing else, prove he hadn’t lost everything.

Poking into his en suite before heading into the hall, he glanced in the mirror to find his eyes far more awake, the whites clear of crimson branching veins and the shadows around them lightened to his skin tone. Thankful that he didn’t need the hours of daily sleep humans did, he quickly mussed up his hair with a dollop of gel in his palm, impetuously deciding to do it differently than normal. Without the girl he’d regenerated for, he wasn’t the same man, and perhaps he shouldn’t look like it.

He stopped by the wardrobe, deciding blue-and-red pinstripes should supplant the brown and teal for the time being, and grudgingly headed towards the console. Thick, heavy silence dominated the abandoned hall, the eerie emptiness pervading his very soul as he walked his wasteland of a ship, desolate without the one that used to give it life, eternally haunted with her memory. He wouldn’t give up, he couldn’t. His racing mind just needed a break, something Rose would probably want him to do anyway, knowing him well as she did. He couldn’t help smirking briefly at the thought of what she might say, a gleam in her eye as she explained *‘you’ll go mad, locked up in this box much longer.’* Maybe her tongue would peek between her teeth as she smiled at him, nudging his arm.

He decided to land shortly after he’d dropped off Donna, sticking with the London timeline he was accustomed to and refusing to admit why. That the time felt like home because Rose had become his. It was after only a handful of hours wandering about the city (steering clear of the Powell Estate) that he noticed a hospital attracting a strange signal of plasma coils around its perimeter. Of course drawn to the irregularity like a moth to a flame, he checked himself in in a matter of minutes, desperate for a distraction from the loneliness closing in from all sides.

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As it turned out, Mickey had picked up quite a few rebellious tendencies since replacing Ricky in this universe.

“So, your dad says y’cant work on it at Torchwood. Let’s do it someplace else, then,” he volunteered
a few days later over lunch at her favorite chippy, once she’d had some time to cool off.

“Wha’?” She scoffed, gawking at him, an unchewed chip still on her tongue.

“Yeah. Bet I can convince a few of the blokes down there to do some volunteer work for us.” His words churned through her mind, sparking a small hope that a more logical part of her quickly extinguished.

“Why would anyone wanna do that, Mickey?” She sighed, rolling her eyes slightly in spite of herself. ‘S not only… dangerous, but, I wouldn’t be able t’pay ‘em anymore. No one’s gonna go for that.”

“You’re right. We need a way to compensate ‘em, but…” He trailed off, catching sight of her hopeless grimace, knowing neither of them would be able to wring the money from Pete, and they weren’t exactly in possession of anything to incentivize overtime. “Don’t worry, Rose, we’ll figure somethin’ out.”

With surreptitious trips downstairs throughout the following week, they were able to gather a team of five capable scientists (thankfully, including Martin) to meet every Saturday at the abandoned warehouse down the street from the Torchwood building. With her best tactics of persuasion, Rose guaranteed them paid half-day Fridays, free pizza and beer at their weekly meetings. They agreed to keep their operation a secret, lie about the half-days, and claim the meetings were to watch football and get hammered, if asked. It was far easier than she’d anticipated to convince them, and she worried briefly that she’d manipulated some of them, but didn’t think she was charismatic enough for that to work and soon shrugged it off.

Noon that Saturday, their first meeting passed in a hazy blur, as the team pored over whiteboards and equations and resources they’d need to somehow acquire or steal from the Torchwood facilities. Their ramblings left Mickey and Rose mostly frozen in confusion in their chairs, occasionally glancing questioningly at each other, lacking enough understanding to even ask the right questions. They were no experts in physics.

As she cleaned up grease-stained paper plates and boxed up the leftover pizza, and tossed empty bottles in the garbage, she assured the guys, who were now properly watching the match on the TV Mickey had lugged in from home, that she’d somehow a hold of some materials they needed by the following week. Leaving Mickey to watch with the others, she copied a large chunk of the nonsensical brainstorming on the whiteboards (hoping she somehow randomly chose the important bits) into her journal before ducking out of the warehouse early.

After convincing her skeptical mother that she’d been with a few blokes from work watching sports and having beers, she headed straight for her room and flipped open her laptop. Surrounding herself with scrap paper and the notes from the meeting, and punching in a search for ‘online physics tutor,’ she set out to learn the language of technobabble, keeping at the forefront of her mind a very enthusiastic, bespectacled Time Lord who would be thrilled beyond all reason that she was even trying.

Before an hour had passed working off of the jargon from her scribbled notes alone, she reluctantly regressed further and further from the specialized applied astrophysics she really needed back to the most foundational level of of college physics she could find. She imagined how he’d explain it as she trudged through the symbols and equations on her sheet. He’d talk too fast, of course, pace about and pull on his hair when he got frustrated, recite some barely tangential story from a century earlier or use an obtuse metaphor she didn’t quite understand. Thoughts of him were the only thing that got her through that first overwhelming night.
It was as he ambled through the library again, flipping through a multiverse text in which he was sure he’d missed something, that a thought occurred to him. The TARDIS had managed to fall through a crack in the vortex and crash land in Pete’s World before, simply by accident – who’s to say she couldn’t do it again?

Tossing the book in his hands on the floor, he dashed out of the library and back to the console, crashing noises from his Chucks reverberating off the walls as he raced up the hall. With rehabilitated hope he bounded up to the user interface, pulling up the archives of system checks and pausing only when he was momentarily stumped by the prompt for a time frame for the search. His hand smacking at his forehead as if it would speed up his internal mathematics, he realized just how rusty he was at converting Earth time. Factoring in the ship’s age and backtracking to calculate the number of operational cycles since their first encounter with the Cybermen, he finally punched in a TARDIS-relative date.

He paced nervously around the console, rolling up his sleeves and combing his fingers through his hair and wondering just what sort of information would come of this. Waves of concern and reprehension from the TARDIS were already washing over him, but the monitor beeped before he had to put in much effort to setting up blockades from her currently unwanted advances.

Replacing his glasses, he scanned hastily through the lengthy list for anything out of the ordinary. Dematerialization circuit, Rassilon Imprimatur, atom accelerator, gyroscopic stabilizer, harmonic generator, tribophysical waveform macro-kinetic extrapolator, inertial dampers all functional... The braking system data was somehow corrupted, along with the Heisenberg focusing device. And the safety check yielded something – the temperature gauges were off the charts for a full twenty seconds. Skimming quickly through the remaining systems, he found everything else operational and fell back onto the jumpseat, hands in his pockets and chewing his bottom lip.

Something had gone wrong with her systems the day they wound up in a parallel universe. The right parallel universe, to be exact, the one he’d give up this very ship to spontaneously appear in. Did they land in a foreign universe because a few systems failed, or did a few systems fail because they landed in a foreign universe?

There was only one way to find out.

Hopping from the seat, he ran around and tore open a floor panel, quickly setting in motion a series of malfunctions according to the ones he’d just discovered by manipulating and rewiring the appropriate components with the sonic. The TARDIS herself was eerily silent, having suddenly given up on her attempt to hack into his mind and reprimand his arguably reckless behavior. He didn’t let it bother him, quickly finishing his task and hopping up from beneath the grating, prepared to send her into the vortex and throw the engines.

Despite the dematerialization being a bit shaky, functionality at least seemed normal as he drifted in the vortex, awaiting a flick of his wrist for full throttle.

“Doctor?” He nearly jumped, his hand releasing its grip on the lever in favor of punching lightly into the surrounding coral.

“Yeah?” he called without turning around, trying to regain his composure.

“Everything alright?” Martha asked, hesitance in her small voice.

“Yeah,” he answered too quickly, nodding a handful of times as he finally whirled around to look at...
her. Giving her a weak, tight-lipped smile, he crossed his arms over his chest to prevent them from other activities. “Yourself?”

“Are we going somewhere?” She mirrored his stance, arms crossed to demonstrate she was on his level, as he’d come to expect.

“Yeah, just, y’know, taking her out for a spin,” he lied, rubbing at his neck, mercilessly ashamed that he could have been seconds away from having her killed in a trek to another universe gone wrong. It wasn’t like he’d forgotten she was there; it’d been three days, after all. But in that precise moment, he hadn’t really thought of her, blissfully unaware of his dangerous plans as she slept in the ship he was responsible for keeping her safe inside, and was suddenly overwhelmed with guilt as he looked in her eyes. She knew something was up, something he was hiding from her, brilliant and intuitive as she was. And a second round of guilt racked through him that he had no intention of telling her the truth.

“In the middle of the night?”

“Uhm, yeah. I was, uhm, calibrating,” he fabricated anxiously, a hand coursing through his hair as he casually powered down the engines behind his back. “Sorry,” he smiled as heartily as he was capable, hoping to dispel her inquisitive mood. “Did I wake you?”

“I dunno, uhm… I just felt, like, something was telling me to get up. Or someone. I thought something might be wrong. I thought it might’ve been you! Does that sound completely mad?” He inhaled a deep breath, awareness dawning on him in that moment that she was the TARDIS’ plan all along.

“No,” he said quietly, offering another smile. “That’d be the TARDIS. Thanks for checking on me.” She returned his smile awkwardly with a nod, glancing nervously from his eyes to the unclasped buttons of his shirt, which had been buttoned when she’d gone to bed that evening. The nervous tension was palpable in the air between them and he only prayed it wouldn’t still be like this in the morning.

“Well, then, guess I’ll be off,” she started.

“Off to the future in the morning, then?” he asked, brightening his tone further for her benefit.

“Yeah,” she agreed, smiling brightly before turning to return to the hall.

“Goodnight, Martha,” he called. It may have been accidental, but it hardly resembled a peaceful parting; the words issued from his throat more like a quiet command.

“Night, Doctor,” she replied with a nod, turning back only briefly before speed-walking out of sight.

A right prick he was being, practically scaring her off like that. He’d apologize for all this, before taking her back home. Explain it was all down to bad timing. He kicked the jumpseat in frustration at himself, appalled for a moment he’d been selfish enough to consider something so risky with a passenger on board. Once he’d dropped her off, he could retry the failed experiment from tonight, without risking anyone’s life but his own… and he didn’t really mind that.

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It didn’t take long to fall into a groove: working nine-to-five hours that made her mum endlessly happy, spending the night in her room learning physics from online lectures from professors and tutors on video sites, and sitting through Saturday meetings progressively less lost as the weeks went on. The meetings were slowly pushed later into the night, bumped earlier in the morning, until they
were spending nearly all day in that worn-down building, and Rose tossed in free lunch, as well.

She didn’t have the doctorate she’d need to volunteer ideas of her own, but only a couple months in
she was at least partially understanding the mechanics behind their daunting task. They were no
closer to actually creating the device. A few blokes had done some crude sketches, but they were
more based on teleportation pads from sci-fi films than anything else, it seemed. The actual
technology had miles to go yet. Even starting with the template from the original dimension-leaping
disks, they had two huge hurdles yet to jump.

At Canary Wharf, the Void ship had cracked the walls between the universes, leaving them both
vulnerable to be crossed via the breach in the respective Torchwood buildings. The devices then
worked off the signature the Cybermen used to jump through, connecting two specific universes –
this one and the Doctor’s – based on the trajectory the Daleks created. They had neither such
advantage (she realized the Doctor would never call them advantages, but didn’t care) in their case.
They had to somehow find the Doctor’s universe in the grand scheme of alternate realities in the first
place, and find a way to rip a hole in each universe big enough to jump through, and be able to repair
the resulting tear in the fabric of reality.

Martin had supposed the device would be aptly named a “dimension cannon” rather than a disc, for
that very reason. It sounded completely mad and thoroughly dangerous, and thoughts of all the ways
it could go wrong, nightmares of exploding organs or splitting the atoms in their bodies or getting
sucked into the Void kept her awake almost every night.

Most sleepless nights, she decided it was worth the risk. She wasn’t endangering the whole universe,
she’d convinced herself of that. If a plan of theirs was going to put the universe at risk, they’d call it
off. Go back to square one, find a new strategy.

But some nights, she questioned herself. Wondered if one solitary alien bloke was worth all this
effort, all the evenings wasted away in front of her computer and a calculator and pages and pages of
illegible notes, half-eaten dinner staling on the nightstand. If one stupid blue box was worth slaving
away her Saturdays with coworkers, devising a plan to risk her life, and possibly others, with highly
experimental and expensive technology. If a man who she wasn’t even sure would have the same
face, or the same personality when she saw him next was worth all the exhaustion, breaking the law
to steal equipment from Torchwood, lying to her parents.

Those were the worst nights.

Because most days, she forbade herself from thinking about him, always breaking down in front of
whatever audience she had if she thought about him for too many consecutive minutes. But when
she allowed her thoughts to take that path, she inevitably always came to one conclusion through the
tears: he was worth it. It sounded ridiculous even to herself, making a mental checklist of all the
things she’d be more than willing to do if it meant there was even a chance of getting back to him.
But he wasn’t just some bloke.

If she learned anything from their uniquely intimate final weeks together, it was that he trusted, relied
on, and loved her, even if he wasn’t able to say it. Oh, she loved him in return, more than she’d ever
loved a person in her life, and that would never change.

Lingering in thoughts of him though, always escalated to remembering how they consummated their
relationship, so near the end. It was difficult for her to separate them, now, the time spent in a purely
platonic friendship melded seamlessly with the too-brief time they were so much more. Every
memory with him was now viewed through the lens of their link, casting brilliant colors through their
history like the sun shining through stained-glass. The loss of something so rare and so precious
ached in places she didn’t know she had, made it difficult to breathe. Her last moments before
sleeping were often dedicated to wishing desperately the Doctor was coping better with that loss than she was.

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Nothing ever worked, of course, any of the times he fiddled with the controls after leaving Martha to visit her family for a few hours. Sometimes he was gone longer than he let on, fixing damage he’d caused or mending up a broken bone from the TARDIS thrashing him about the room, like an abused horse trying to buck off its rider. His hope thoroughly expired when he accidentally set fire to one of the fragile engines, barely extinguishing it in time to prevent the entire edifice from combusting with time energy. Just before he and Martha set off for early 20\textsuperscript{th} century New York, he was forced to truly confront the idea that his grand, daft scheme was never going to work.

He practically asked the Daleks for a lethal shot that day, offered himself up as a sacrifice for the town, even when he knew it would never stop them. Oh, he was a danger to himself, indeed. And he had no idea why Martha was still inclined to stay with him, or if it was even safe for her to anymore. But he couldn’t bring himself to kick her to the curb, when she clearly enjoyed traveling as much as she did (on the good days, that is) – she didn’t deserve that, to be left behind because he couldn’t pull himself together.

It was only a downward spiral after that. Nothing he could do could possibly repay Martha for her patience and persistence during her time with him, especially putting up with that twat he’d become, John Smith, but the very least he could do was call off his inane mission to try to destroy his own ship or blow holes in the universe, or else kill them both trying. It was stupid to ever try, self-destructive and volatile as he was, when he couldn’t think straight about his own or his companion’s safety, to continue in such a hazardous and hopeless mission.

Matters only became worse and worse without anything to sidetrack his mind, piling on more guilt and giving him more anxiety than he could ever handle, when he still hadn’t figured out a way to cope with losing Rose and make peace with himself that he could do absolutely nothing about it. It all culminated in his relinquishment of every semblance of control, in the Master’s steel prison with what seemed infinite time to mull over what a complete mess his life had become.

And of course, Martha left him. As she should have, really. All the knowledge, the confidence and experience she gained traveling on the TARDIS, saving the world, even – he had nothing else to offer her, not really. And besides, he was absolute rubbish at dealing with that dysfunctional thing between them, the thing he never liked to talk or even think about, that she harbored romantic affections for him, though their intensity remained ambiguous to him. She could do so much better, helping people on Earth, using her medical expertise and her brilliance grounded where he couldn’t disappoint her anymore.

But it left him alone again, staring at the desolate console, surrounded by only the rhythmic beating of the time rotor, talking to a ship that couldn’t even answer him properly.

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The months dragged on. Money and materials came together slowly, outside contractors were hired to help build the cannon in the old warehouse. They just hadn’t had any luck actually getting it to function as anything other than an Earth cannon. Every failed jump landed her or Mickey simply in another location in the middle of their own London, sometimes nearly struck by a car or ramming straight into a wall, even rarer sometimes appearing in the middle of someone else’s flat. They’d have only a few minutes to make an attempt to escape or gather enough information to know they hadn’t moved universes, before they’d get pulled back, reappearing in the bleak building to Martin’s usual
She knew the margin of error was roughly ten miles, relative to their location in the warehouse, so
the fact they never quite landed in the same spot didn’t surprise her. A device with enough power to
manipulate space-time had to sacrifice precision of location, if Greg’s theoretical relationship
between the two were correct. The entire team was increasingly impressed with Roses’ ability to
check their numbers and follow the progress of the cannon; she blamed the Estates and poor public
education systems for squelching any curiosity in the sciences at an early age.

Regardless of her developing technical prowess, they simply couldn’t break through the walls
trapping them in this universe. There didn’t seem to be a single fissure between dimensions that they
could slip through, at least not without traveling to far-reaching parts of the universe. Even if they
could recalibrate the cannon for teleportation through space, they didn’t have the necessary
equipment to guarantee safety in the event they landed on a planet with hostiles, or an anoxic
atmosphere, or God forbid in the middle of nothingness itself. If there was even a tiny gap
somewhere, they weren’t able to reach it with tools they had. Not without something akin to a
TARDIS. Sometimes she found herself cursing the Doctor, wondering why he hadn’t already found
a crack somewhere in space or time to make his way back. He had a bloody time ship, one of the
most powerful ones in existence at that, and she was the one putting in all the effort.

But every time she chided herself, knowing there could be a thousand reasons he wasn’t able to get
through, same as they couldn’t. He didn’t just give up without exhausting all the options.

But the months went on, some jumps failing altogether and others still bouncing them off whatever
invisible, impermeable wall separated them from the void and back onto the streets of London.
Eventually, they stopped trying every week, only giving it a go when they’d made enough of a
change to the mechanics to have any hope that this time, it might work.

One Saturday morning, something finally shifted. The preceding week had been just like any other,
ot even bothering to do a test run. Just after 7am, Rose was the first to arrive besides Martin, and
even he was only reading a comic and sipping a cuppa he’d brought from home. Setting down the
coffee and bagels she started bringing once they’d pushed back their meeting time far enough that
breakfast was in order, she asked him to prep for a trial, too impatient to wait for the others when
they usually didn’t roll in until well after eight.

“What for?” he scoffed, laughing sarcastically.

“Look, I just… got a feelin’, all right? Just fire ‘em up.” She couldn’t explain the feeling, not to
anyone, and she wouldn’t have tried. She hadn’t slept the whole night through, dreaming of
blackness devouring the room she slept in, her family, the TARDIS. When she woke she felt
strangely apprehensive, and yet coupled with the uneasy feeling was the distinct sense that it wasn’t
isolated to her mind.

Moments later she was standing in the ominous metal circle she’d been tossed from so many times
before, closing her eyes, holding her breath, waiting for it to be over. The screeching of it still
tormented her ears, the artificial wind rushing around her blowing her hair in her face and making it
impossible to breathe, a blinding blue light assaulting her eyes even behind her lids. That’s when she
normally landed somewhere in the middle of their city.

But this time, black followed upon the light, an absolute, palpable darkness that wrapped thickly
around her body, its heaviness pervading her mind as it threatened to swallow her whole. And yet, it
lasted only a fraction of a second: the light and the tornado assaulted her again, and she was spit out
onto the ground, feet stumbling as they came in contact with soft earth. Immediately, her stomach
twisted and she lurched in pain until she was sick on the grass under her feet, a side effect she’d
never experienced before. Righting herself as soon as she could stand properly, she truly looked up at her surroundings, the slowly darkening park she’d landed in.

The sun wasn’t rising; it was setting.

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He was just checking on some things, while Donna was unpacking in the room he’d opened up for her. Making sure doors were locked he didn’t want her snooping in, nothing frightening or off-putting lying about in the media room or the library, ensuring his room was far enough away from hers that she wouldn’t be knocking on his door in the middle of the night.

He hadn’t mean to end up in Rose’s room, tucked away in a far end of a spiraling hall, for the first time in months. Especially after he promised himself he’d never go back in, after last time, after the Titanic. He’d passed three days by, letting time move forward without him, before he snapped out of it and realized even Rose herself would be ashamed of his wallowing. But even now, entering the room, with its soft yellow light and pink and purple decorations on the bed, her things scattered around the way she’d left them: it was a breath of fresh air to drowning lungs, such welcome relief from the burden weighing on his shoulders. Before he could stop himself, he was collapsing on her bed, letting himself fall into memories, into a dream where she still made the room glow with her very presence.

He didn’t know what else to do. It’d been months since he’d even tried anything, made even a paltry attempt to do something to unlock the universe she was hidden in. He’d thought about finding every supernova in the universe, and just visiting her every day until he ran out of suns to incinerate. But what good would that do her, to see but never be able to be with him, properly? For him to never be able to touch her again but be perpetually tantalized by her image?

He’d thought about combing the furthest reaches of the universe to try to find another crack between the dimensions he could slip through – all he needed was a moment. But the TARDIS was irreversibly programmed to shy away from those sorts of events, and without help from her, he’d have to find it by accident. 100 trillion years of time, millions of light years of space to search within the vortex. He’d never find one, least not before Rose was… he shuddered into her blanket, not even wanting to think the word to himself.

Nestling his head into her pillow, his mind wandered back to the night they slept together after Krop Tor, their hands clasped beneath the blankets. The next morning, when he held her as she cried and soothed away her fears with his hands stroking down her back. The way she kissed him a little bit later, after falling asleep in his arms.

He remembered it like it was yesterday, the soft, hesitant press of her lips against his, their texture making his head swim and unable to process his racing thoughts. The cocktail of emotions coursing through him in those precious seconds: hesitation, all-consuming fear, the pulse of love and quick throb of arousal at the newness of the intimate touch. He’d wanted to open his mind up right then, snog her senseless as he thoroughly showed her how much loved her. But it was that fear, the stifling, suffocating fear of showing her his darkest demons, of losing her, that held him back.

Of course, fearing she’d hate him or leave him once she found out about his past, that worry had been uncalled for. But the fear of losing her… his hands clutched fiercely at the duvet. The very thought that the intrinsic, nagging fear had been justified, had come to fruition… it was still a fresh wound, tender and raw and with little sign of healing anytime soon. He wondered if he’d ever be able to repair the hole she’d left in his hearts, regeneration or not.

Donna was going to be good for him, he could tell that much. And thankfully, didn’t seem remotely
interested in pursuing anything with him beyond friendship.

But Rose wasn’t someone he could ‘get over’ simply, having shared everything with her, given everything to her. Rose – how was she coping? He’d done this with only a couple humans before. One had been thoroughly frightened off (only after getting what they came for), and the other despised him for the things they saw buried in his mind. He hadn’t had much proclivity to do it again after that, but with Rose it was different: she wanted it. Not just the physical, but… everything. If it was still affecting her the way it was affecting him, then…

He was doing it again, underestimating her. She could pull through this. Would she want him to do the same?

The TARDIS gave him a quite distracting tap on the head, the kind that he could almost physically feel. Suddenly realizing it’d been three hours since he stepped into the room, he scrambled off the bed, closing the door behind him and dashing down the hall to find Donna. Within a few hundred feet he heard rather than saw the first indication she was looking for him.

“Oi! Doctor!” Her words echoed through the hallways, even louder than usual, followed by a string of other nicknames he didn’t particularly fancy.

“Yes, yes, I’m coming!” he called back as the voice got louder.

He nearly ran into her at his breakneck speed.

“Where the hell have you been?” she asked, attempting to sound angry but only achieving relieved. “I’ve been looking for hours! Don’t you have any food in this place? I’m starving! Guess you never eat, though, do you? Skinny Martian.” She appraised him up and down, of course resorting to her default insult about his (not-so) thickness.

“Yes, alright. Long streak of nothing, I get it. C’mon, then.” He nodded in the direction he started walking.

“Where did you get off to, though?” she asked again, following closely behind him as he led her to the TARDIS kitchen.

“Hmm? Oh, nowhere, I was just… wandering.” Oh, that was a terrible lie.

“You’re a bad liar, Space Man.” He took a deep breath, nodding slightly to indicate she was right. Maybe it would help to get some off his chest, talking about his… ex, to use the grossly inadequate human colloquial. He didn’t have to worry about offending her, if her expressions of disinterest were true. And she was right, after all. Especially after the disaster with the shipwreck, he did need someone to stop him from doing something stupid, to lift him up when he was down. He supposed he ought to start telling her the truth, anyway, if she was his next frequent flier.

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“Are you sure?” Every member of their makeshift team had asked a thousand times already.

“Yes!” she snapped. “Fucking hell, if y’don’t believe me, why don’t ya just see for yourselves!”

“Ok, ok, take it easy, Rose, it’s not that we didn’t believe you.” Mickey was the first to try calming her down, and she instantly regretted swearing at them.

“I know, ‘m sorry just… Mickey, why don’t y’come with me, we can stay a bit longer, see what we can find out. Don’t change any of the settings,” she added the last for Martin, thrusting a finger at
him, still overly worked up. He held his hands up innocently, no intention of changing anything, or just to appease her. Maybe both.

“Alright,” Mickey agreed, walking to the cannon. He squeezed her hand before stepping into the ring, and she looked at him curiously. Before he could explain, though, he was ripped in a swirl of particles and light from where he stood. She waited long enough it was sure he’d landed, and followed suit, the force tugging her feet from the ground, sending her tumbling through space again for an eternal moment before she crashed onto the ground again, asphalt replacing metal beneath her soles.

It was the same sky she’d seen before, viewed from a different spot.

“See? No zeppelins,” Rose gestured to the air above them, turning to where Mickey’s shape a few feet away, but he was doubled over, clutching his stomach and breathing heavily. Right, she forgot about that.

“Ok, thought that might’ve just been me. Guess when this thing properly works it makes you feel a bit sick. It should pass in a minute.”

“No, ‘m… fine…” He didn’t look it, not in the least. He suddenly wheeled away from her, hardly making it three feet before emptying the donuts and coffee he’d just eaten onto the ground beneath him. She was endlessly thankful the nausea wasn’t affecting her the second time around, silently theorizing what the time frame for adaptation to the sickness was and whether it might return on future trips.

“Alright?” she asked when he finally turned, patting his shoulder hesitantly.

“Yeah, yeah, think so. Just wasn’t expectin’ that.”

“Me either,” she laughed a little. He didn’t laugh, but he did start to get his bearings, to look around.

Cars passed periodically on a nearby road outside the alley, and they emerged from it to find completely normal-looking humans, no obvious signs they were in a new universe. The nearest newspaper stand told them the date was the same as theirs, and eavesdropping on passersby confirmed they could at least understand everyone speaking.

“How far’s the Estates?” she asked, glancing around for landmarks she recognized. As much as she knew she shouldn’t be feeling even a fragment of hope, considering this was their first real, successful jump, it crept up anyway, swelling in her chest as she pondered visiting what might be her proper home.

“’Bout three miles away,” Mickey replied as soon as they spotted the signs at the next intersection. “I dunno if that’s a good idea, though, Rose.”

“Why not?” she probed, voice hard and brow furrowed.

“Listen.” He tilted his head towards the nearest passersby, a couple walking and eating chips out of a shared container. It was nothing; they were just talking about some bloke called Matt from work and what a twat he was being at the meeting on Tuesday. Shrugging in frustration, she watched Mickey again, trying to decipher what it was she was supposed to be hearing. Gesturing to the next woman walking towards them on her mobile, he raised his eyebrows, indicating she should try again.

Rolling her eyes and already spent of patience, she tuned her ears to what she was saying. Again, nothing important. Something about a rugby team kicking ass the night before. Oh. Her mouth fell open as she gaped after the retreating figure, shock and disappointment brewing in her gut. Ass. She
was plainly using an American accent. As was everyone else, she only now realized, flipping back through the recently stored audio clips in her memories.

“Americans?” was all she could manage for a moment before she sped off, a bit too obviously approaching every person she could find to confirm it hadn’t been a complicated accident to run into give or six groups of tourists back-to-back in the middle of London.

“Wonder if they’re talkin’ like us in the States, then,” Mickey chortled behind her just as she gave up, finding every single person on the streets distinctly Jack Harkness in accent.

“This is completely mad,” she said, sighing as she put a hand over her forehead. “Well, guess there’s no point goin’ anywhere, then. How long’ve we got?”

“He said twenty minutes, right? Means we got ten left,” he surmised, glancing at his watch.

“We need some attachment, some way to let ‘em know we want to come back early. Or need to, if it ever comes to that,” she added as they found the nearest bus stop and took a seat on the empty bench.

“S probably a good idea,” Mickey agreed, thoughtful as he stared into passing traffic. “What does this mean, though, Rose? We haven’t changed anything for weeks – so how comes it just worked all of a sudden, just like that?” He snapped his fingers.

“I dunno.” She swallowed hard, mulling over the spine-tingling possibility she’d been contemplating since she first arrived here, alone. “I think maybe… there was another crack, or a hole, yeah? Like the one we found with the Doctor.” It still burned her throat to say his name, still sent shockwaves of emptiness through her, but she skipped over it. “I don’t think ‘s the cannon that broke through. We couldn’t before.”

“What if ‘s not just a hole? What if it’s bigger than that?” He asked, meeting her eyes gravely. It was one of many possibilities swirling through her head, but also among them was that there was a fluke in their wiring, that somehow something was accidentally tweaked sometime in the last week.

“Know the best way to find out?” she asked after a few moments, a wicked smile spreading across her face.

“You’re a nutter.” He shook his head and turned back to face the road like he was uninterested in her next daft plan, but he was smiling, too.

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Their foreboding inklings had been right, of course. Jumping universes had only became possible, even with their high-tech, clandestine operation, because the walls between worlds were crumbling, warning of something even worse. Stars blinking out at night. Darkness seeping through the cracks from the Void. Left with no choice but to disclose the imminent danger to Torchwood, Pete and the other authorities blessed them with permission to resume the project within the facility.

A flexible budget expanded their resources, a larger team of scientists worked daily to formulate equations for the power, vectors, velocity, coordinates of the next jump, and Rose could delegate routine tasks and put in overtime rather than hide in her room. In only a week they had a prototype for a remote controller to terminate prematurely. Things were starting to look up; there was finally hope. It was merely the same variety of strange irony that seemed to follow her around that hope came as a packaged deal with a threat to the existence of the multiverse.

Rose wouldn’t allow anyone but herself to traverse the Void, once the universes revealed themselves
to contain dozens of unknown dangers – she stood firm in insisting to be the one to find him, as the one who knew and understood him the best. Though she was staunchly determined to find him, fuelled by the persistent vision of reuniting with him at last, the job soon started to wear her thin, break her spirits. So many universes were wrong. She’d find herself sometimes, still working at Henrik’s, years after she was supposed to have met the Doctor. Some universes didn’t have her at all. Others had neither a Pete nor a Jackie Tyler.

Some, the date and time were synched to the second with her universe, others were hours, even months behind or ahead. Time sped faster in some and crawled slower in others, as she sometimes found when she returned to startled or worried faces.

Life-threatening trips became more frequent. One world she fled in seconds time when Daleks had apparently overrun the planet. Another was crawling with red, humanoid spiders. One infested with the same shop-window dummies from that fateful night… Any tragedy she saw, any disaster encountered and recorded in her journal, she was convinced had been prevented by the Doctor back home.

But there was no sign of the twin-hearted alien anywhere she went, no evidence a blue box had ever appeared on the streets of London, or disaster been averted by an odd, stand-offish bloke in a leather jacket or a brown suit. Of all the universes she found, how could the Doctor exist in none of them? It was like… there was only one copy of him. One version. Trapped in the home she couldn’t seem to get back to, no matter how they manipulated the mathematics. She couldn’t stop the feeling she was replaceable, so incredibly unimportant, when the Doctor was so one-of-a-kind, and so many universes suffered disaster without him.

Two years after being left on that beach, everything changed.

Everything was right. The language, the location, her and her family’s existence, their flat untouched… she was home. But as she bolted as fast as her legs could carry her down to the Clements building, confident she’d find the Doctor at the scene of a catastrophe, she skidded to a halt at the scene only to find the action over with. Water still poured from the ground floor, sirens sounded and flashed in every direction to care for victims of the suspicious flood. A woman at the scene said they’d found a man, some bloke called the Doctor, but he was dead. She didn’t believe her.

But then she’d seen a thin, brown arm emerge from a covered stretcher, a bulky stick of metal with an orb of blue slip from the hand at its end and clatter to the asphalt, and her world turned upside down, her breath caught in her throat and her heart pounded out an erratic rhythm. In a hazy, desperate rush her feet scuffled towards the gurney, some landmarks wobbling in her periphery as her stomach turned with imminent calamity.

“Ma’am, please stand back,” admonished one of the technicians, barring her with an outstretched arm.

“Please, he’s my – please, I think I know him, just, can I…” she trailed off, tears already rolling down her cheeks as she wrestled with her mind to cling to a shred of hope so she could speak.

As both men nodded their permission, with steadiness and stoicism that surprised herself, she pulled back the cold, starchy white cloth slowly, not wanting to betray tremors to anyone but herself. She only managed a fraction of a second to glance at the still, pale face below her, the one she’d dreamed and craved to return to for so long, devoid of the life and energy and charisma that made him… the Doctor.

She was too late.
Squeezing her eyes shut and clamping a hand over her mouth to keep from screaming, she activated an early return. Her feet touched ground at Torchwood and she crumpled to the floor, her prolonged cry of despair filling the room before it was reduced to sobs, and shortly losing her lunch onto the floor from something unrelated to dimension travel. Others rushed over but she couldn’t hear their questions, couldn’t feel them prodding and lifting her up, checking for injuries. She could only tremble, trapped inside the frigid, desolate new reality overtaking her, twisting her love for him and tainting it with agony, making hollow ruins of her treasured memories.

She didn’t know how long had passed she hadn’t spoken an intelligible word; only that the sound of Mickey’s voice pulled her from the haze of anguish enough to think, to communicate. She explained slowly, pulling a blanket she hadn’t realized she’d been given around her shoulders and close against her body, offering the least vague details she could manage, terrified to relive the moment but needing him to understand.

But of course, he asked how she knew he was gone, and she was done for. She collapsed against him as she recounted his cold lifeless form, muffling cries into his shirt as he pulled her tightly against him, whispering consolation and rubbing his hands down her back.

“Rose, love. Can you look at me?” he said after a few minutes. She obeyed, wiping hastily at swollen, stinging eyes that must have been blood red.

“Maybe this is just another wrong universe, and the Doctor’s still alive, somewhere else.”

“But Mick –” she stopped, hardly recognizing the broken, raspy tone of her own voice.

“Remember what he said about parallel worlds, when we first landed here? Some are different, they’re a special kind.”

“Alternate,” she said with more strength, remembering the conversation (or, it was more of a speedy, rambling lecture).

“And alternate universes are created when –”

“Someone makes a choice…” she finished his thought. “Maybe someone made the wrong choice, and it changed reality enough to branch off. So it seemed just like ours, so they must’ve split off recently, yeah? But maybe he’s still alive in ours!” She smiled as her voice gained volume, striving to sniff and wipe away the last of her tears though her unsteady lungs made her breaths quiver.

“That’s the spirit,” he encouraged, patting her shoulder and planting a kiss on her forehead. “’M sorry you had to see that, Rose. But don’t lose hope. We’ll find ‘im, find the one where everyone made the right choice. Hell, maybe we can even help ‘em do it,” he smiled cheekily.

“Yeah, right,” she chuckled, warm relief slowly seeping into her ice-cold veins and hope swelling in her empty chest until she could feel her heart beating a healthy rhythm again.

“Ok,” she agreed, taking Mickey’s hand. “Let’s do it.”
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

I know this one took me a while, guys. I'm sorry! Just been swamped with work. We're nearing the end, though, and as a result this chapter took decades of researching, planning, and editing to make this climax unfold the way I envisioned it. Hope you guys enjoy - I know I've been terribly unfair not answering any questions that would spoil the ending. This will probably raise as many questions as it answers, but have no fear. All will be explained in the end! Happy reading :)  
WARNING: Frequent mentions of death/murder.

Really, he wasn’t sure matters could get much worse.

Empty roads, cars abandoned with open doors, and scattered debris sprawled out before them as he and Donna stepped out of the TARDIS, and as soon as a quick scan around for victims in need of assistance turned up nothing, his noisy brain overpowered the silence of the desolated street. The Daleks had control over the entire planet and were planning something he’d known nothing about until only hours before, and he had no idea how he was going to stop it. Everyone’s final hope, their last ditch effort, was to get him here, the tremendous faith of a few extending to the masses, and so far he was no help at all. And the forecast of the immediate future wasn’t much better. It wasn’t a new brand of guilt; it was one he was intimately familiar with, in fact, but that didn’t stop it from chewing away at his already tattered conscience like a moth.

Oh, and then there was the fact that his best mate got to have a chat with Rose, the very person who embodied everything he wanted in the universe… without him.

He and Donna argued sometimes, of course. Disagreed over their next destination, had a row about who was in charge and who should and shouldn’t be saved, bantered about which species was superior. Normally, though, they got on brilliantly. Two peas in a pod, really. But it took everything he had to keep a lid on his roaring jealousy that Donna got to talk to Rose, to even get a glimpse of her. If only he’d have known she would run into her when she wandered off. Had known any of this. He hated having to bring it up again, to try to extricate information so impersonally when someone so important to him was involved.

Add to that the constant need to maintain a functioning radar – for a stealthy rogue Dalek or a desperate fleeing human or a surprise casualty to steer Donna away from – and honestly he was hardly listening to what she was saying. Just vaguely registering every other word for any sign that could clue him in on what the hell he was supposed to do. When he opened his mouth again it was a struggle not to shout from the sheer intensity of the volatile emotions.

“Anything else?” None of this was her fault, sure, but it would damn well help if she could look him in the eyes and not get distracted by looking over his shoulder every minute. He raised his eyebrows, more impatient by the second.

“Why don’t you ask her yourself?” Not even under normal circumstances would that be funny, let alone their current predicament facing down an apocalypse lacking even a direction to run. But… her question was quiet, careful, the words a delicate tiptoe rather than a spiteful blow, and she was still looking over his shoulder with this strange expression on her face. Not the one she reserved for her
usual insults and jokes about his size or his clothes. Almost like… no. It couldn’t be.

Right? It couldn’t.

If she wasn’t kidding, she had to be mistaken about the whole encounter. She hadn’t met her at all. It was worth it to humor her, to see what she was on about. Whoever it was behind him might be able to help.

Indeed, a woman stood in the middle of the black pavement amidst the rubble. Her blonde locks set a spark of hope in his heart, but his stomach churned, tugging his mind away from the danger of hope. She was at least a hundred meters away, this stranger carrying oversized ammunitions and donning dark colors, and the harsh yellow light of the remaining street lights almost too bright against the night sky, obscuring her face just enough to let doubt fester.

His mind rejected the notion immediately, recoiling in on itself, protecting himself from being crushed when she turned out to be just another doppelganger, or worse – an apparition. His body was reacting against logic’s caveat, though – his breaths shallow and irregular, palms damp inside clenching fists, lips parted in shock, head aching with the tension of his straining eyes beneath the deep furrows in his brow.

But then something shifted. It was the smallest of changes, but impossible to miss. She smiled. Something in his chest fluttered to life. He knew those teeth, those lips, even a half a mile away, seared as they were into his memory.

His Rose.

His body was frozen, his mind still racing, scanning her for a sign he’d been struck down and regenerated, or that she was a hologram or a dreadful new version of Dalek trap. Synapses everywhere were firing the signal to run to her but his feet only shifted on the asphalt, heeding a deep-seated warning to stay planted firmly on the ground, to wait. His voice was caught in his throat, his legs went numb, and all he could do was gape, passively stand by for some confirmation he could go to her without risking his hearts, which were thrashing erratically into his ribs after three years hardly beating at all. Without fear that this sweet, blissful dream would vanish in a puff of smoke. Time slowed to a stop as he stared across the stretch of road that separated them, that seemed to lengthen with each eternal passing second, keeping them apart even now. Still as the Roman statue he’d once become, spellbound by a smile that was so nourishing to a starving soul.

She was moving. Walking. No, running. She was running. She was going to save him tonight like she did before, return stone to flesh; but this time her very presence was the only serum she would need.

She was moving. Walking. No, running. She was running. She was going to save him tonight like she did before, return stone to flesh; but this time her very presence was the only serum she would need.

He should have started running too, he really should have. But he was still just standing in disbelief, gears in his mind slowly clunking to life, lacking the equations and theories to make sense of the concept that she was really there. That she’d somehow broken through walls of universes and risked her life and found him, when he hadn’t even been able to do the same. In all the thousand ways he’d imagined making his way back to her, he never once considered it would be her who found him. He always imagined finding her angry with him for getting her stuck there, bitter for not saying he loved her, or completely over him and indifferent to his presence. But she was running to him, with a heavy-looking gun slung over her shoulder, at that, and her smile lit up the desolate road more than the lamps lining either side. She was happy to see him.

It was that thought that had him running, too.

Possibilities swarmed his head as his legs carried him down the street, the circulation jumpstarting his
faculties again. She’d done it. Whatever happened during the rest of this horrific day, he’d be with Rose. They could die together and he’d be happy about it. Oh, my God, she still beamed at him as they came closer until finally he was smiling back, fewer and fewer cars and posts and dark road between them.

At the thought of taking her in his arms at last, of her feet lifting off the hard ground as he pulled her tightly to his chest, he was faster with every stride until it became almost surreal. Was he going to tell her what he never did? As a quiet whisper, or a melody belted to the foreign sky? Maybe both would be best. Or maybe he wouldn’t say it straight away; maybe a kiss would communicate his sentiments better. Thoughts of her lips on his in only seconds quickly made this option win out, and every other sensation became irrelevant: the tingling in his muscles from the flood of excitement, the unforgiving shock of his chucks on the ground, any memory of the time that had passed between them. The universe that had so exhausted and defeated him faded from view as his vision tunneled, Rose shining a light through it that blinded him to everything else.

Ex-ter-min-ate…

What? He gasped.

It happened in slow motion. As quickly as he’d entered this fantasy he was dragged from it, alarmed by the familiar sound and realizing too late that he’d not only left himself completely vulnerable, but made an easy target of Rose, as well. About half a second was all he got to slow his pace and glance at the owner of the dreadful voice and be overwhelmed with panic over who it was going to shoot.

The searing, white-hot pain shot through his shoulder before he even saw the beam of blue indicating the coming shot, the burning and tearing sensation spreading across the entire left side of his torso and taking him to the ground instantly. It was alright, though, even as he twisted unnaturally and crumpled to the street in agony, because Rose hadn’t been hurt.

Staying barely upright long enough to ensure Rose was fleeing the scene, instead a second shot fired and he saw half the Dalek’s body explode, wondering only briefly who shot it before his head hit the ground.

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Rose’s words and his responses and Donna and Jack’s presence were all a blur. Rose held his head in her hands and suddenly that was their reunion, no hugs or kisses or amorous declarations. He couldn’t even form any coherent thoughts or images to communicate to her, overwhelmed with the pain and the reality of her hands in his hair and the relief that she was alive and she made it and she was alright. He’d never been so happy in such severe pain, though it was hazed over as the world tilted on its axis like he’d been drugged.

The shot was fatal. The pain was amplifying rather than easing with time, tendrils of the supplementary agony of regeneration energy already seeping through his trembling core.

Why, why, why. Finally reunited, and now he had to change, to become a new man that there was no guarantee Rose would love. Or even want to know. That crippling fear more than the liquefaction of his tissues made him cry out in anguish because he thought he’d rather die than live to see Rose reject him. This was just his luck.

Somehow the three of them lugged him, limping and groaning, into the TARDIS and he collapsed on the grating, the energy already spreading to his extremities, the soft golden glow in his hands. Jack was insisting Donna and Rose back away and with good reason, but he wanted to leap up and call it off, reject his biology and design a new way to heal himself on the spot, because the only thing
he could see as he looked up into their faces were Rose’s tears.

“I came all this way.” He wasn’t sure if she intended him to hear or not.

He wanted nothing more than to comfort her, to stand and shake off the pain and hold her and tell her there was nothing to worry about. That he was there, and always would be. But unless he wanted to die and leave her to fend for the universe with the others, he had to go through with it, give in to the vehement tugging of the energy demanding to overtake him.

“You can’t!” Rose pleaded with him and he ached to comfort her, to not have to change.

“It’s too late.” He struggled to get a grip on the console, doing his best to stand upright to face his task, but he couldn’t turn from the fear and sorrow in Rose’s eyes, haunting his final moments. “I’m regenerating.” As he gasped out his last breaths, he only hoped he could convince her he was the same man by restoring their link after they saved the world.

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The fact that regenerations were really a sequence of two steps had never really occurred to him. Not until that moment, when the plasma and heat consumed him and his only thought was Rose and how much he wanted to stay the man she knew, that he fiercely hoped she was still in love with.

Two more things occurred to him, after that. First, that he could easily gauge the separation between the end of cellular repair and the overhaul of cellular phenotype by the replication of the third strand of DNA, simply by thinking about it. Second, that he’d never been able to halt the process in between those two steps, but suddenly even amidst the internal flames realized he was uniquely poised to do so. His severed hand was still resting a few feet away: a perfectly compatible receptacle to siphon off the remaining energy without causing any explosions or murdering everyone in the immediate vicinity, something he’d lacked access to the first nine regenerations of his life.

And it worked. It actually worked. He stumbled back as the last drop of energy fled from his hands, and his suit fit identically, his snug trainers not adjusted an inch, his line of sight at the same level, slim frame unfilled with muscle or insulation.

“Now then, where were we?” The same voice he’d come to know broke the frightened silence of the room.

He went on for a few seconds, a bit dazed from the brush with death and still hazy from the rush of regeneration energy, filling the bewildered silence with the best explanation he could think of on the spot for how he didn’t change his appearance this time around. Though at first three sets of confusion and shock stared back at him, Rose was the first to transform her expression from disbelief to a glimmer of hope.

“So, you’re… still you?” she asked, stepping out of Jack’s arms and closer to him. His heart was full to bursting as her eyes invited him closer, filled with hope that she might just believe him, that his grand attempt to please her had worked after all. Still repeating the chant to himself, yes, Rose, it's me, please tell me you still love me, he answered her aloud with less pathetic word choice.

“I’m still me.” It was arrogant of him to assume that she’d come back looking for him, since the multiverse was in danger, and as an associate of Torchwood she might have been obligated to defend their universe. Maybe she found him by accident, or maybe she sought him purely to get his help, to hire him as a contract savior as so many seemed to do. It wasn’t like she owed him anything; maybe she’d gotten over him, didn’t love him as she once did. Maybe she found someone else in that other universe. How much time had passed there?
But he couldn’t stop himself from hoping. Just gazing into those eyes painted a smile on his face, evened out what he thought were permanent creases in his forehead and around his eyes. Even at a distance, the warm flush of life on her cheeks was a fireplace for his frosty hearts, the light aroma of her skin a tempting taste of bliss from a life he thought he’d lost forever. She still stood there, staring, waiting on something, and he wanted to take her in his arms and kiss her – really, properly kiss her, stitch the tears in their severed link and probably tell her he loved her. In front of everyone, anyone for that matter, for as long as he could. Until the Daleks were banging down the door of the TARDIS.

She hugged him instead. In some ways it was just like all the countless times they’d embraced before. Her hair smelled just like it used to, her chin tucked into his shoulder the way it always had when they were celebrating and carefree after saving one world or another, a smile still spread across his face that he couldn’t rein in if a Dalek pointed its laser in his face. But this time it wasn’t a marker of their close friendship, a physical reminder of their developing emotional connection, proof for the galaxies to see that she was his plus one. No, this was even deeper than that. This time her arms came around him soft and warm and insistent and held his broken pieces together in a way no one was ever able to, not even Donna, and especially not himself. This embrace filled that gaping hole in his chest he thought would be hollow for eternity, flooded the warmth of life through nerves that were icy and desensitized from years of regret and loss.

And it would have been so easy to surrender his mind to her in that instant, to relax his conscious grip on his memories and pain and love and joy and let them overflow into hers, to welcome her back into his life in the most intimate way. What a sweet, healing relief it would be to restore that connection as it once was. But something still tugged on his subconscious: tiny nagging doubts that she wasn’t ready for that, or that she might not want it anymore. So one hug would have to be enough, for now, because this was all in her hands now. Every step they took from here had to be her decision. She was the one who’d crossed the Void to make it here, the one who might have moved on without his knowledge.

There was also the valid point they were all four still in grave danger, along with the rest of the Earth, and didn’t quite have the time to bare their souls.

It was a strange, contradictory thing: praying with every ounce of effort in his existence that Rose hadn’t suffered the way he did, while yet some hurting, selfish part of him hoped that she had. That she would understand what she would see in his mind, sympathize with his chronic loneliness so their hearts could reunite and truly heal together.

Later, he thought.

That tumultuous ultimatum pushed to the back of his mind, he slowly eased them out of the hug, squeezing her hands as they parted, but he was met with a look of wonder on Rose’s face. His only guess was she was curious why his mind was utterly silent, but he knew they couldn’t sacrifice the time for him to explain now. With the slightest loosening of his iron grip on the tendrils of his mind, still quivering with desperation to embrace Rose’s, he was able to send her a silent message the others couldn’t hear.

Talk more later, okay? His eyes bored into hers as if to impart images to the words, hoping he had opened himself enough for her to hear, but not enough that she’d see an accidental glimpse of other horrors brewing in his head.

A small nod, subtle and undetectable to the others, told him she heard and understood. As he took his place to command the console once more, starting to shout to the others to take places around him and instructions on how to operate a certain segment, the room was engulfed in darkness. Not just
the lights, but all the power was completely sapped.

The Daleks.

“They’ve got us!” he shouted, at the very least informing the others that what had happened wasn’t his doing. “Power’s gone… some kind of Chronon loop.” They began to lurch and shift as the TARDIS was locked onto a target, the engines firing and lights returning as they were dragged blind through space towards wherever the Daleks were taking them.

“There’s a massive Dalek ship at the center of the planets,” explained Jack. “They’re calling it The Crucible. Guess that’s our destination.” He gave up trying to fight the hacked controls, opting to lean against a coral and listen to any other information he’d missed out on so far.

“You said these planets were like an engine… but what for?” asked Donna. He didn’t have any more of a clue than she did, really… but Rose just might.

“Rose! You’ve been in a parallel world. That world’s running ahead of this universe. You’ve seen the future, what was it?”

“It’s the darkness,” she answered simply.

“The stars were goin’ out.” Donna knew, too, he supposed, having talked with her for a short time. Might have been helpful if she remembered a little earlier.

“One by one,” Rose continued. “We looked up at the sky, and they were just dyin’.” Stars going out could only mean a trail of total desolation. He just stared, waiting for more, at a loss for how to stop them if they were taking out suns and planets by the hundreds.

“Basically we’ve been buildin’ this, uhm… this travel machine, this, uhm… dimension cannon so I could… well, so I could…” He’d hardly ever seen Rose so inarticulate, stumbling over her words and pausing to think too often, and as she glanced up at him he realized those dark honey eyes were nervous. Actually nervous to tell him, whatever it was. He had a fairly good idea why that might be, and his hearts swelled again.

“What?” he asked, a smile betraying his feigned ignorance.

“So I could come back.” Like it was the most obvious thing in the world. Like he was a daft, old man for asking. And in her eyes again was an insecurity that she didn’t want to reveal, one he could read only because he knew that insecurity intimately. It wasn’t his help she was wading through universes for, not at the outset. It was him.

He giggled like a child at Christmas; she told him to shut it but she couldn’t stop the ridiculous grin on his face. He was ninety-nine percent sure she was as happy to see him as he to see her. Couldn’t they just hurry up and save the world already? He and Rose had so much to discuss. Among other things to do. Lots of other things. Ruddy timing, this was, having to abstain from catching up and snogging after they’d been apart for three years, all because the bloody multiverse was threatened. Ruddy lovely timing.

“Anyway, suddenly it started to work,” Rose went on, seeming to ignore his elation the same way he’d brush aside unnecessary demonstrations of emotion when he was trying to work out a solution. She’d picked up a few survival skills in her time at Torchwood, it seemed, and tried to suppress the mild rejection and replace it with pride in her strength. “And the dimensions started to collapse. Not just in our world, not just in yours, but the whole of reality. Even the Void was dead. Something is destroyin’ everything. And… it’s weird but… they all seem to converge on – ”
Beeping from the console interrupted Rose’s thought, too loud to be easily ignored. Not another moment passed when a loud thump and the shaking of a rickety landing signaled they’d reached their destination.

“DOCTOR… YOU WILL STEP FORTH OR DIE.” A particularly nasty and garbled robotic voice sounded through the front doors.

“We’ll have to go out,” he admitted to the others, quiet and somber. “Cause if we don’t, they’ll get in.”

“You told me nothing could get through those doors.” Rose’s voice was concerned he’d lied to her.

“You’ve got extrapolator shielding.” Jack was right, on a normal occasion.

“Last time we fought the Daleks they were scavengers: hybrids, and mad. But this is a fully-fledged Dalek empire at the height of its power. Experts at fighting TARDISes. They can do anything.” Fear played equally on Jack and Donna’s faces, telling him they’d been relying on the TARDIS’ defenses to act as their safe haven while they devised a plan. Rose seemed to be distracted by something, glancing often to her left, paying attention only occasionally to the words coming out of his mouth.

“Right now, that wooden door is just wood.” He thought about any other options for a brief moment before turning to Jack. “What about your teleport?”

“Went down with the power loss.”

“Rose, what about your dimension jump?” He turned to find Rose facing away from him, craning her neck to stare intently at something to his right. He glanced over to see what had captured her attention only to see the container with his severed, newly energetic hand in her line of sight. He knew she heard him, nonetheless, and assumed she simply didn’t want to answer. And he knew what her answer would be, anyway, as a Defender of the Earth herself. She wouldn’t want to leave after she’d only just arrived, before the action even started.

“All right, then. All of us together, yeah?” Still, she didn’t answer, or even make any indication she was listening.

“Rose?” He was mildly concerned now. What had gotten into her? She was ogling at the glass, open-mouthed, like it was a set of instructions for how to defeat the Daleks for good, tattooed on his naked body. Maybe she was in shock.

“Rose,” he whispered her name again, this time stepping forward to take her shoulders in his hands. A light squeeze snapped her out of it, and she turned to him, dazed and afraid but listening.

“I’m sorry. There’s nothing else we can do.” He tried to assuage her fears, but he knew the chances of them all making it out of this alive were slim. But just what – or rather who – the collateral damage of success would be this time, he didn’t know.

“Yeah, I know, ‘s… fine, Doctor.” She smiled weakly, hardly convincing him she understood the gravity of walking out to greet the Daleks, weaponless. He knew she did know, though, so he didn’t let her nonchalance fool him.

Another ugly demand for their surrender sounded from outside and this time he truly cringed. As his final insurance policy, he decided to say an inadequate farewell to each of them, in case this ended badly, to show them he was proud to end it all by their side. Most importantly, Rose’s side. Even facing down a likely death, he could still put a genuine smile on his face; his eyes were bright with hope simply having her smile back at him. With that life-giving image still in his mind, he turned to
lead them from the comfort of the TARDIS, from their makeshift home, into the unknown terrors waiting outside the doors.

He couldn’t have prepared himself for how the flashbacks would return, how his stomach would twist with nausea and his vision blur with terror, at the sight of the fleet of Daleks swirling overhead as he stepped out of the doors. Manic chanting and a constant whirring of engines and hovering devices filled the air, single blue eyes and lasers swiveling mechanically to zero in on him as he stepped into their bullseye. So transfixed was he on the sickening sights and sounds, their taunting him to take a good look at the ‘true Dalek race,’ it took him a moment too long to check that Rose was behind him.

The slam of the doors made him whirl around to find Donna and Jack his only company, Rose nowhere in sight. He assumed she’d be the first one on his heels.

“ROSE!” He bolted for the doors only to crash into them, locked tight.

“DOCTOR!” she called from the other side as he fought with his key only to find it nonfunctional. “I’m not stayin’ behind!! What did you do?!”

“It wasn’t me! I didn’t do anything!” It was a struggle to keep the panic from bubbling in his voice. Who knew what the Daleks might do if they thought he was trying to hide a stowaway on the ship, when they’d demanded complete and utter surrender?

“What did you do?!” he screamed at the thick, red leader, calling himself the Supreme One.

“This is not of Dalek origin,” it replied, stoic and running thin on patience already.

Rose called for him again.

“Stop it!” he demanded again, shouting at any member of the fleet who was listening, grasping at straws for some measure of mercy, whatever it may be. Rose had come all this way, and he’d been so lost, and now she was back, and he was so happy to… she couldn’t… no…

“Open the door and let her out!”

“This is Time Lord treachery,” the mangled voice bellowed.

“Please, the door just closed on its own!”

“Nevertheless, the TARDIS is a weapon, and it will be destroyed.” As the sentence was spoken, a metallic clunk and blast of air startled him from behind. He turned, though, to find the entire TARDIS had fallen through a trap door in the ground, the gaping hole casting white light into the dimly lit hangar, leaving him to run and stare after the ghost of its image for a harrowing second before running full speed back to the monster who gave the order.

“What have you done!? Where’s it going?” he barked, fighting down the contents of his stomach and struggling to keep his jaw from trembling.

“The Crucible has a heart of Z-Neutrino energy. The TARDIS will be deposited into the core.”

“But you can’t. You’ve taken the defenses down. It’ll be torn apart!” They couldn’t do this to him. They couldn’t. This couldn’t be his fault, too. Not now. Not Rose. Not his Rose! His head was pounding, hands shaking, vision darkening as the reality of his first round of torment set in. Whatever he thought the worst that could happen was, it was nothing close to this. This paralyzing fear and throbbing guilt that Rose was about to die alone, after all she’d been through, after all he’d done to
protect her.

“Rose is still in there! Let her go!” It might have been Donna, or Jack speaking for him in that moment, maybe both, he couldn’t be sure.

“The female and the TARDIS will perish together. Observe.” The voice was absolute as it indicated they turn around. “The last child of Gallifrey is powerless.” He was powerless, as he saw the live feed from the screen behind them, of the TARDIS slowly sinking into the lethal, molten energy.

“Please, I’m begging you! I’ll do anything. Put me in her place! You can do anything to me, I don’t care, just get her out of there!” They had to see, now, how desperate he was, but he didn’t even care. So he offered his hearts up to them, holding on to the last flimsy life raft keeping him treading water. If he couldn’t save her, he wasn’t worth saving his own dignity or even fighting chance at defeating them.

“You are connected to the TARDIS. Now feel it die.” The words punctured the raft; the flood washed over him and it didn’t matter he was Time Lord, this torment would drown him as swiftly as any human. They really didn’t get it. It wasn’t the TARDIS whose life he was begging for, let her die. It was Rose. He watched in horror, waiting for some miracle the TARDIS could work to save Rose but knowing it wouldn’t come, not with their hijacking her controls. He heaved in what he hoped would be his final breaths of air, because he really, really hoped they’d kill him after this. Something painful that he deserved.

Donna’s hand landed on his, squeezed lightly in a weakly comforting gesture, and he had to stop himself from shaking his hand to free it of her attempts. She only ever wanted to help. He squeezed back pathetically, tears brimming at his eyelids and his lips quivering with a cry he was strangling in his throat.

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He could think of no crueler torture, when all his hope was lost, than to bear witness to Davros’ psychotic scheme, rooted to the spot and force-fed the unsettling sight of the humans who’d engendered his trust threatening the Daleks with extreme violence… with genocide. Martha, with the Osterhagen key on the verge of blasting the Earth to smithereens, and Jack, with Sarah’s warp star, poised to detonate the Crucible and kill everyone inside without filter.

“You take ordinary people and you fashion them into weapons. Behold your children of time, transformed into murderers.” Davros meant to provoke him, was only waiting for his composure to snap.

“They’re trying to help,” he tried to argue, but it was no use. He believed in them, but not in himself. What if he had turned them into weapons? Doing work in his name he’d never dare to even threaten with himself?

“How many more? Just think. How many have died in your name?” Oh, he knew. They were always there, locked away in a sinister cell in the back of his mind, all the lost lives he may as well have taken himself. Jabe and Lynda and Mrs. Smith and Astrid and Jenny and River, and hearing about Harriet Jones from Martha and Jack, and now… Rose. Rose, no. All his effort was going towards just breathing in an out, through gritted teeth with nonfunctioning lungs, standing with a force field between himself and Davros’ verbal onslaught.

All his harassment carried too much truth, it rang out in the terrified silence and echoed with precision, every word another blow to slowly cracking glass, and any moment his very structure would shatter, the shape disintegrating and pieces scattering until there was nothing left of him. The
realism bomb would be but the second phase of his destruction, physical proof that he was defeated, a faux fallen hero exposed for what he truly was. Oxygen didn’t seem to do what it normally did, the guilt still tightening in his chest as the room tilted and swayed in his dizzied eyes. But no one cared what plagued his mind and body in that moment, not while he was so openly ridiculed, a live display that everyone’s sacrifices were for nothing, that he was powerless to save them all despite their misplaced faith in him. Even Rose… most importantly Rose.

“This is my final victory, Doctor, I have shown you yourself.” Didn’t he understand? He already knew all this. He was already burdened with more guilt than he could possibly explain and already hated himself.

But Rose. He’d be with her again soon. He sent the promise to her, wherever she may be, because he couldn’t go on without her. Knowing it was his fault. She’d be the last to ever die in his name. The constant, relentless ache of loss from a life before Rose tinged in his chest again, such was the agony of losing her now, piercing through flesh and soul indiscriminately until it was nearly too much for him to bear. He was at a loss, prepared and willing to surrender his life as penance for his sins, as an apology to Rose’s memory that would never be adequate.

The humans’ plans were foiled, of course. A transmat brought all his so-called *children of time* on board the Crucible.

“Doctor, where’s Rose?!” were Jackie’s first words aboard the ship, and he couldn’t answer her, couldn’t even meet her eyes out of disgust and horror at himself, just shook his head and buried his face in his hands like it would drown out the sound of a mother losing her daughter.

He wanted the bomb to detonate and disintegrate him, already. But he couldn’t let it. He couldn’t let Rose’s sacrifice be for nothing – that’s not what she would want. Save the others, her mother and her friends, whose lives were now in even greater peril standing defenseless in this satellite of destruction, then maybe… But he was powerless and without a plan that could possibly work without freedom from this invisible prison. Donna was locked in an identical holding cell, but the others were more or less free, though held at gunpoint, a pair of Daleks aiming their lasers in their general direction and Davros’ sinewy caverns of eyes on them all. Even if he could no longer see out of them, the Supreme One and Caan were hyperaware of their surroundings. Brainstorming a plan outside the confines of his mind was completely out of the question.

Davros gave the command.

The game was over.

Someone was yelling over the announcement of the Supreme One for detonation in 200 rells, and only when the sheer force of it burned his throat did he realize the pleas were coming from his own mouth.

Even over the insane, hysterical laughter of Davros, his shouting ceased abruptly when a familiar echo entered his ears, the repetitive tearing sounds a crescendo of blissful music as they became louder. He thought he must be fantasizing the sound, that perhaps his brain was disintegrating from the detonation and his mind fabricating a soothing final song for him. But he turned to the source of the noise at the same time as every other being in the room to see it: the TARDIS, materializing not twenty meters from where he stood, soft white light shining from its windows like he hadn’t seen since Satellite Five.

He waited there, perched on the divide between hope and desolation, staring open-mouthed at the glowing blue doors half-convinced this was someone else’s time ship coincidentally disguised as a blue police box. The door creaked open, though, and the woman appearing in the doorway
brightened the grim scenery even more than the streaming white light from inside the room. *Rose was still alive.*

Waking from his nightmare he realized he could feel the TARDIS all around him, her essence infiltrating his mind to re-establish their connection, and he knew he couldn’t dream up that sensation. *Rose was still alive.* Darkness scattered in her wake as she ran, carrying what looked exactly like a Z-neutrino biological inversion catalyzer; hope was reborn from the ashes where it burned minutes before, the faith of the entire company aboard the ship resurrected from an early grave to shocked gasps and joyful cries from Mickey and Jackie.

Her trajectory was taking her straight to Davros, though. His glorified wheelchair sent him retreating from her advance, but this wasn’t going to end well. If he understood her plan correctly, it was to lock the crucible’s transmission onto Davros himself using the catalyzer, targeting the bomb for anything with Davros’ genetic code – in other words, every last Dalek aboard the ship. Sounded like the biggest backfire in history. How she figured it out, he’d have to ask later, because there was no way she’d have time to work out how to fire the weapon before being shot down herself. Any member of the race could shoot at any moment.

“Rose, don’t!” he screamed. But it was too late; Davros fired a bolt of electricity from his bionic arm, hitting Rose square in the chest and sending her flying backwards, the weapon clattering to the floor where she was struck. A random Dalek singed the weapon before anyone else could take it.

He heard himself screaming before he pinpointed its source again, watching her crumple to the ground by a control panel near the TARDIS. In such a short moment, hope had been robbed from him again, the rug pulled out from under his feet so swiftly he didn’t know how he was still standing. Seeing the TARDIS disappear and inferring what followed was one thing; watching her shot down before his eyes had him doubling over, his hands on his knees, his legs trembled with horror beneath his sweating, shaking hands. His eyes were still glued to her form, searching for any sign of life, but three seconds passed and he was ready to give up.

Five seconds. Respiratory bypass.

Eight seconds. Jackie had really lost it. Please, let him die.


There! One of her eyes opened, blinked in a secret signal of reassurance so quick he almost missed it. Oh, thank the heavens and stars and planets above, she was alive. She had a plan. Or did she?

He scrambled to erase the memories of the last several seconds, shaking his head to clear them away. She was alive, she was alright. Scouring his brain for a way to use this to their advantage, Davros and the rest thinking Rose was dead, he thought there must be some way to tell her what to do, to freeze the Z-neutrino energy and release the holding cells. He realized something though: there was no way Rose could have saved the TARDIS on her own. The TARDIS herself must have helped, somehow showed her what to do by forming a telepathic link like she maintained with him… but how would she have understood? Oh, he’d worry about that later.

*Can you talk to Rose?* he asked the TARDIS, trying to concentrate on reaching out to her from the distance without attracting attention to himself. Davros and the others seemed not to care about either himself or Rose, instead celebrating the countdown and prating on about victory and their unstoppable bomb.

She answered yes, unmistakably.
We need to close all the Z-neutrino relay loops. He watched Rose slowly roll and crawl behind the control panel she landed beside, and from what he could tell most of the others saw her move too, subtle relief spreading across their faces. Mollified at least temporarily, he strove to focus his energy on Davros, shouting measly attempts at stopping them with words, distracting them, ensuring their undivided attention was on his suffering and not Rose’s antics. Some kind of internal backfeed reversal circuit, There should be a wire, a blue one from the mainframe to the external –

An alarm sounded, ceasing the last ten seconds of their maniacal countdown and shortly causing uproar amongst the lesser Daleks.

“Explain, explain!!!!” The Supreme One repeated.

He hadn’t even finished explaining. How on Earth had she figured it out so quickly?

Okay, good, but we need to shut off their weaponry. And quick, before they’ve figured it out! He floundered for a way to do just that, given the controls he was unsure whether or not were present on the console in front of her. This ship should be capable of transmitting wavelengths across long distances, if we can get a K-filter started the power in the core may be able to replicate the signal long enough to –

“Exterminate, exterminate!” The chanting had already begun, the Daleks primed to fire on the first humans in their view. But the shouting wasn’t followed by firing lasers and cries of death, like he expected. Somehow she’d figured this one out, too.

“Weapons non-functional!!” a particularly shrill Dalek shouted. Glancing around to a handful of others, it seemed all the weapons in sight were being swung left to right, clicking ineffectually to more shouts about their uselessness.

“Rose, they’ve stopped, the holding cells, deactivate the holding cells!”

“I know, I don’t see it!” She called, leaping into sight, standing to display her victory to everyone, Daleks and humans alike.

“The cells are made of a magnetic force field. They project a continuous stream of negative charge on a nano-specific scale, blocking all forms of matter from passing through on at the atomic level. If there’s a way to shut off the electricity altogether – ”

The vaulted hall was plunged into darkness as the power was cut.

“The force fields are target-locked,” he continued as he stumbled blindly in the direction of the control panel and Rose, freed from the tiny invisible prison. “Switching the power back on won’t restore their positions, the locks will be reset!” He finished just as a hip collided with the control panel amidst screaming from several companions and merciless shrill panicking from the Daleks.

A crescendo of whooshing precluded the return of the lights and various user interfaces, and some of the Daleks were getting clever, closing in on their location with the intent to either crush or roll them both over, weapons be damned.

“Trip stitch circuit breaker – ” he began,

“… in the psychokinetic threshold manipulator!” Rose fired off the words at breakneck speed while throwing series of switches.

“What!” he gaped, dumbfounded. But the Daleks closing in on them both suddenly lost control of their movements, spinning with no rhyme or reason along with every other bumpy-shelled
Roach, how did you know how to do that?” he asked, a mixture of panic and wonder flooding his mind and spaying across his face.

“Honestly, Doctor, I dunno.” She continued playing with the controls, sending their pursuers in reverse away from their workspace. “I think the TARDIS is communicatin’, or there’s someone tellin’ me what to do. And before, ‘s like, I could understand what you were tellin’ me, somehow. It made sense. It still makes sense.”

He reached out a hand to cover one of hers, to stop her from going on because he really, truly needed to know if this was some cyborg, a projection, a cheap copy of Rose to toy with his emotions again. As much as he cared for her, and knew she’d learned her fair share working at Torchwood, he knew she’d never quite been able to understand when he babbled about fixing things around the TARDIS, and Dalek technology was until now completely foreign to her. When his skin touched hers, though his mental defenses were still in place, a different kind of force field preventing a premature display of emotion on his part, something was very off. His hand jerked away like he’d been burned, such was the shock of discovering she was very real, but so very different.

He was always bringing in chemical and biological information about every organism when he touched it, most of it quickly ignored by his conscious mind unless it was pertinent to the situation or a matter of life or death. Statistics about mineral status, internal temperature, hormone and neurotransmitter levels, genetic information.

“Rose, you’re…” He felt the blood drain from his face as he pulled out his sonic to conduct a speedy but thorough scan from head to toe. “What happened to you?” He asked mechanically, mentally compiling a list of suspects who had done this to her in such a short span of time.

“I dunno, something happened in the TARDIS.” She waved the question off as insignificant, but on glancing at him, she found something in his expression that made her worry.

“Doctor, what is it?” She touched his hand again, sending the anomaly screaming through his veins again.

“Never mind, we’ll deal with it later.”

“Doctor –”

“Right now, we’ve got to get these planets back where they belong,” he interrupted, shouting over whatever plea she was about to make.

“You’re right,” she agreed, straightening her posture and returning to the controls, like she was unaffected by his cold remarks shutting down the conversation. “Activatin’ the Magnetron.”

He helped her fire up the right switches and enter in the correct coordinates for each planet in turn, while the others started defending their ground against Davros’ wheelchair and the feeble attempts of the other Daleks to stop them. They made quite a team, when they weren’t wielding weapons of mass destruction. Jack wasn’t really a surprise, what with the operation he had with Torchwood, nor Sarah Jane or Martha with their past experience, nor Donna with her never-faltering bravery. But even Jackie and Mickey impressed him.

“But you promised me, Dalek Caan!” Davros shouted. “Why did you not foresee this?”

“This would have always happened. I only helped, Doctor,” Caan replied between hysterical laughter.
“You betrayed the Daleks?” Davros asked.

“I saw the Daleks, what we have done throughout time and space. I saw the truth of us, Creator, and I decreed, ‘no more.’” He could hardly believe what Caan was saying, but it made more sense than he’d ever have thought. He must have been pulling him and Rose back together for ages, manipulating timelines so they’d meet at just the right time, so she’d save the universe. Without some help beyond his own measures, they’d never have reached this point.

They had twenty-six planets back where they came from, save for the Earth, when the Supreme One decided to blast the controls and compromise the Magnetron, halting their progress just before the most important planet was returned home. The red beast burst into flames at the hands of Jack before it could wreak any more havoc, but their only plan for getting the billions of people on Earth back to safety had also gone up in smoke.

“Doctor, what are we gonna do now?” Jack asked.

“Just give me a moment, we can use the TARDIS, but we need to take care of things here first!” He flung a hand in his general direction to ward off further questions, hoping everyone else heard the announcement and resolving to postpone any further comments on the matter.

“The prophecy must complete,” Caan continued his earlier monologue in the same bone-chilling, off-key melody. “I have seen the end of everything Dalek, and you must make it happen, Doctor.”

“Don’t listen to him!” Davros shouted, uselessly.

“He’s right,” he admitted, as the words slowly sank in. Another genocide was at the tips of his fingers, another trail of death and destruction ready to follow on his heels wherever he decided to travel next. “Because with or without the reality bomb, this Dalek empire’s big enough to slaughter the entire cosmos. They’ve got to be stopped!”

“Doctor, what are you doing?” Rose asked, grabbing his arm to stop him from pulling a lever.

“Maximizing Dalekanium power feeds,” he answered coldly, shaking to try to free his arm from her grasp. “To blast them back!”

“Doctor, stop it! You don’t have to do this! There’s another way, there’s _always_ another way!” She was the voice of warmth and life but not logic, even though his mind yearned desperately to listen to her, to not let down the woman he’d disappointed and failed to protect so many times. He knew it had to be done. He couldn’t risk the safety of everyone on Earth, everyone aboard the ship, especially not Rose, ever again. He couldn’t.

“Rose, I’ve got to, there’s no other way. They’ll find a way to destroy us all again, to destroy me, everything I…” He was at a loss, physically unable to push or injure her to get free from her restraints, but his mind shied away from allowing the Daleks live a moment longer, to threaten their future together: the amorphous, chaotic future just starting to make itself known on the horizon.

“We can use the dimension cannon!” She interjected, just before he’d gotten free from persistence alone.

“What?” he asked, shocked enough to pause his current plan and listen.

“Mickey can go back. Bring Pete and Tony with him. We can use the dimension jump to send them back into the Void.”

“What? How’s that? You told me the Void’s disappeared!”
“The reality bomb is gone, too, now, all that is reversin’! Doctor, we’re changin’ everything! But we’ve got to act fast or we’ll run out of time. The walls will close again!” She was right. She was so, so right. The Void should be intact enough to handle the delivery. But how, how?

“Well, you don’t have millions of those little devices, do you!” he asked.

“No, but, Davros said – ”

“His genetic code runs through the entire race!” He finished Rose’s sentence while she nodded with an encouraging smile. “He uses it, when he goes the entire race will get transported with him! Ha!” He shouted, hope finally making itself known at last.

“See, there you go!” Rose beamed.

“Do you have it with you?”

“Mickey does!”

“But how do we get them to the Void? Can they even do that?”

“Yeah. We’ve never tested it, ‘course, with a human anyway, but if you don’t input any coordinates, the device will lose track of space and time and whatever dimension it’s in and end up getting lost in the Void itself. So we just get it around his neck with no coordinates, push the button, and they’re all gone. We seal up the broken walls and they’re stuck there forever.”

“Brilliant! Mickey, do as she says!” He shouted, on looking around to find the entire human company aboard the ship was eavesdropping on the conversation.

“Yes, sir.” With a salute, he fiddled for a few moments with his own device before he pressed the button, vanishing with a loud ripping sound from where he stood.

He returned in only a fraction of a second, Pete following closely behind, covering the eyes of the three-year-old child in his arms. Taking both the devices from their necks, Pete shoved them into his chest in exchange for the TARDIS key before dashing to the ship, quickly followed by Jackie. Seeing them safely tucked away, he returned his focus to one of the devices in his hands, handing the other to Rose for safekeeping.

“How do you set coordinates remotely?” He asked, unable to speak anything at all without shouting.

“I’m already on it,” Rose said, fiddling with her own device by opening up the back and pressing a series of buttons in sequence until the appropriate numbers appeared on a tiny green user interface in the hidden panel.

“We just need to get it on him!”

“I’ve got it!” he offered, grabbing the device from her hands as she closed the back panel and already taking off in his direction.

“Doctor, wait! Don’t press it! It’s set to genetic lock, you’ll get pulled in, too!”

He searched around for some way to avoid doing it himself but came up blank, instead continuing his sprint to Davros’ retreating chair and throwing the necklace around his neck. Left with no choice, he grabbed onto one fleshy hand and the inactivated metal replacement, stopping his arms from tearing off the device as he turned around to apologize to Rose. He had to press it; Davros never would.
When he turned, though, Donna was blocking his view of Rose.

“DON’T JUST STAND THERE, DUMBO!” she shrieked, wrestling one leg into the air so she could pull off her shoe and wield it in the air like a weapon. Understanding her intention, he nodded, though wincing at the possibility of failure if she timed this wrong. Taking a deep breath, his fingers released their grip and he stepped out of range.

He didn’t even have time to blink before the shoe was hurtling through the air, spinning and flipping out of control with asymmetry, on a trajectory that was hardly anything he could impose any physical equation to on the spot. The entire room was silent, waiting on the edge of the knife until finally it reached its target – clanging perfectly onto the button in the front with the heavy heel. Davros along with every Dalek in existence disappeared in an instant with an ear-splitting howling and an explosive crack vastly more terrible than the sound of a single person disappearing.

The cheering from their party of seven was unlike anything he’d ever heard, but amidst shouts of victory, praises of Donna, and even tears of joy as the others hoisted Donna onto their shoulders, he knew there was still work to be done.

“Everyone in the TARDIS!” he called, running up to the doors and gesturing wildly with his arms for everyone to follow him. “We are gonna fly the Earth back home!!”

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It was easy, in perspective. Repairing the holes between the universes with the TARDIS’ help. Getting the TARDIS base code from K-9, assigning (almost) everyone on board a control panel to fly his ship like it was meant to be flown, getting rid of some of the characteristic lurching turbulence – something that they couldn’t have when towing something as precious as planet Earth. It was back in the Solar System where it belonged in no time, harmonious again with the sun and its moon and the other planets, like it had never been stolen from its niche.

The celebration was epic in scale: they’d averted a multi-universal apocalypse and everyone seemed intent on celebrating it as such. There was a feast everyone helped prepare and plenty of quality wine from the cellar to sustain them all through hours of catching up, laughing over who’s had the worst luck, swapping horror stories of the universe’s strangest aliens. There was the chocolate cake that Sarah simply insisted on making that put them all passed stuffed and sprawled across the carpet and couches lazily as they joked and played some selections from the TARDIS’ plentiful stack board games into the early hours of the morning.

No sooner had their rejoicing died down though, as some of the older members of their party began to drift to the abundant guest rooms, that his buzz began to wear off, and the more pressing thoughts started to weigh on him again: like the fact that Rose was alive, and here with him, and that he didn’t know what the night would hold. Was she going to say she wanted to stay? To continue their relationship as it was? Oh, he wanted that. So badly. But how would he cope, knowing he’d changed her into something she didn’t ask to be, inadvertently given her an ability that he’d come to despise with age? He’d have to at least talk with her, if she did want to leave. No one mentioned the short conversation between him and Rose that he’d abruptly cut off, not even Rose herself, and he certainly wasn’t going to. He’d much prefer the first time they discussed it to be in private; he was just at a loss for how to instigate that conversation.

As it turned out, he didn’t have to.

She found him in the media room where they’d all left him after the last round of Charades, after walking a very tipsy Jack to his temporary room. It was just as he was beginning to brood that no one was going to come and spend the night with him that he started scribbling out details of the
glimpses of timelines he was getting into a notepad in Gallifreyan, and she stepped silently into the room. It was only when she cleared her throat that his head snapped up.

“Doctor, I think we need to talk.” Getting straight to the point. It was what he needed.

“Yeah.” He nodded, stuffed the notepad and his glasses in his pocket, and stood to meet her more or less at eye level.

“C’mon.” She tilted her head towards the door, indicating he follow, and he obeyed immediately.

She led the way through the halls without a word, the sound of their footsteps and the distant chatter of Sarah, Donna, and Martha a few doors down the hall the only sounds in the echoing space. It was only in a few steps he realized she was taking them to his room, and for some reason that fact wrought more anxiety than the discussion itself.

She opened the door with what he might call aggression or impatience, almost like she was as anxious as he was; he closed it behind himself, never taking his eyes off her face. She lingered two feet away, staring at him with lines creasing her forehead and her bottom lip quivering like she might burst into tears, a thousand unspoken words in her eyes but none yet on her tongue. What did she want to ask him first, really? He wanted to answer them, whatever the questions might be, but he was equally silent. His mouth hung half-open like he might speak, say anything to fill the extensive silence, but words seemed an inadequate form of expression to him, as well. To fill her in on the years she’d missed, to confess the truth about what had happened to her and the implications of it, to even begin to explain the chaos of elation and terror warring in his mind. Words wouldn’t be enough.

She saved him once again, though he’d lost count the number of times. She pressed him into the back of that door, stopping the commotion and indecision in his mind with her lips on his, her body molding to his own, her arms around his neck and his around her waist, and he couldn’t hold back another moment. Her embrace was desperate though tender, surrounding him in warmth and peace he thought he’d never feel again. Her lips pressed ‘I missed you’ into his own, brushed over the scars they’d left behind and healed them on contact, made whole two hearts that were broken for so long, and last of his mental defenses crumbled in an instant. He was completely, unreservedly hers.
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

Thanks hanluvr for the beta and shutupandlovetennant for putting up with my whining and supporting me endlessly through this. This is it guys - the final chapter. The Doctor and Rose reunited, in every sense of the word. I do plan on writing an epilogue for them but we are so close to the finish line, I can hardly even think about it without getting overly emotional. God, I love these two so dearly I don't know how I'm going to let go of them. Well, I hope you guys can forgive me for the long wait, and that you enjoy reading this as much as I enjoyed writing it. All my love <3

For what felt like hours she just let down the barriers that nearly four years at Torchwood had built within her. Let herself truly feel, sink into his arms and his lips and just him. Warm and sweet and the mild spice she hadn’t been able to place since losing him. She drank him in like cider on an icy night, radiating comforting warmth from her lips through her chest down to her toes, because he knew damn well how to kiss her properly and he tasted so good. So unlike the faded memories she turned to before sleep each night, dimmed and twisted by time until they were only fuzzy recordings of the reality – of what it was really like to kiss him.

There were other things, too, flickering in the noisy static of his mind, a chaotic broadcast through in her already jumbled thoughts. Pain and loss from the years she missed, the shock and wonder that she was truly here, snogging in his room like they’d never parted, thanks and praise that his hands could hold her close and his fingertips resonate with her warm pulse even through her clothes.

She’d missed this too much to take advantage of a single moment, the way the threads of their minds weaved and intertwined, slowly stitching together as passion poured from their lips and his tie and her jacket joined each other on the floor. It seemed so preposterous now, to have wished she could have this kind of intimacy with anyone else, because it was the way his fears and happiness reflected her own, the tender, almost hesitant embrace of her mind with his own that echoed the dwindling nerves in her own heart.

It got darker, though, the thrill mingling with dread as the Doctor’s thoughts pinpointed from the torrent of mixed emotions to a singular target: something was different. Something on her skin, on her lips and on her tongue… she caught the last bit of internal monologue with something about rewritten biology.

He hardly had a chance to lift her onto his bed before she stopped his urgent, curious fingers from lifting her shirt over her head.

“Doctor, hang on,” she whispered through labored breathing. “Before, when you asked me what happened, in the TARDIS. You seemed... scared. D’you know what happened to me?”

He sighed, his hands collapsing to the mattress to either side of her and his dark eyes boring into hers, and without any point of contact his quiet inner voice had gone silent.

“I'm not going to die or anything, am I? I mean, whatever it is I think I’m all right, I feel fine. I even feel… better.” She met his eyes and tried her hardest to keep the fear out of them; only curiosity, unbridled interest were what she wanted him to see. He seemed to believe her well enough.
“No, you’re not going to die. But it’s... It’s permanent. I can’t reverse it.” The last words were spoken in a hopeless whisper that sent a chill down to the pit of her stomach. She grabbed for his hands, needing the reassurance she wasn’t getting.

“But what's permanent?” She tried to stay calm and to not barge in, to wait for him to explain, but it was getting harder by the second. Sensing her distress, though, he went on without hesitating longer.

“You remember how I regenerated... But I didn't? The hand was a receptacle for the leftover energy, the stuff that would have made me change again. I don’t know why, but... Somehow when you got left behind, the energy transferred itself. I think the TARDIS may have helped... Maybe remnants of when you absorbed all her energy... The point is, somehow, you absorbed it all.” His rambling ceased as his internal cogs clunked away almost audibly, biting on his bottom lip in deep thought.

“And?”

“And, well, you have a third strand of DNA.”

“But you... Don’t you have... Oh my god, am I a Time Lord now?”

He laughed and gave her a peck on the lips that she couldn’t quite reciprocate.

“You’d be a Time Lady, But no. It’s human DNA, not Gallifreyan. As soon as I touched you, I knew.”

“But a third strand of DNA? Doctor I’ve learned a lot about biology over the years but... How’s that possible?”

“Well, you’re right. I’ve got three. It’s characteristic of anything that can regenerate. Third strand displaces the first in the even of fatal cellular injury. Completely repairs and rebuilds the body.”

“So... I can regenerate?”

“Yes. And not just that, you’re not going to age. Well, I suppose you will, but, slower than you were before, by about an order of magnitude.”

“So that means...”

“You can stay with me.” He finished her sentence with a stronger glow of hope than she’d ever felt from him before.

“Forever,” she added, before drifting into thought for a moment.

“But, how many...”

“Rose, can we talk more about this later? I promise we can, I just...” He kissed her collarbone, hands lifting up the fabric of her shirt to roam up her sides and brush along the fabric of her bra. “I want to be close to you right now.” Even his breath against the hollow of her throat felt so good shivers coursed through her body. “Please.” He peppered light kisses along her neck, a plea to give in again, a gentle nudge coaxing her down onto the duvet until she was flat on her back. Her fingers twisted in his hair as his lips brushed a zig-zag trail down her chest, his hands pulling down the neckline of her shirt, but eventually she tugged him up by the thick strands, needing to taste him herself.

“I missed you so much.” He shook his head like he still couldn’t believe she was here. Truth be told, she was having doubts herself, that maybe there was still a chance she’d wake up in a cold sweat in their alternate universe mansion. She took his face in her hands, thumbs brushing over his cheeks,
warmth and the roughness of too many hours without shaving telling her he was real.

His mind pushed forward, too, as his brown eyes melted into hers, a delicate embrace of her own that insisted he was tangible, that she couldn’t imagine this because she really had never been able to, all this time, no matter how she tried. *I’m real. I’m here. It’s all right.*

He pushed and she pulled and their mouths met in a messy gesture of renewed desperation. She scooted back on the bed and he crawled over her body along with her, and she was busy unfastening buttons on his jacket and shirt while he worked on her trousers but they couldn’t break the kiss. The comfort with which even the most chaste touch of lips enveloped them was something they only craved more intensely with the passing of time, as horrors and secrets of their time apart were bared.

His hands tightened their grip on her waist and behind her head and his too lean (had he been skipping meals?) body pressed against hers as they relived the devastating loneliness of the first few months. The pain was still so sharp, so tangible between them; it carved new gashes amidst old scars to experience a second perspective of the lost years, though in each other’s reassuring embrace they strove to bandage and heal them all as quickly as they came.

He was so, so much more terribly off than she ever thought he would be. Seeking friendship in the company of anyone he could get it from, inviting anyone and everyone he met for a trip on the TARDIS, spending sleepless nights scouring the ship for a way to find her again. Silent tears escaped her eyes when she saw how bad the darkness in his mind became, to the point that he wished for death on more than one occasion.

But she saw everything else, too: the hero shining bright past the veneer of lonely alien vagabond. All the people that would be dead without him, from New York to London to the Titanic, but all he still could manage to do was blame himself for every life that slipped through his fingers, tightly though he may have held on. The overwhelming fear that overtook him on that possessed spaceship, the crippling guilt after the explosion at Pompeii – isolated incidents here and there added up to a massive burden on his hearts. But one that she’d accept gladly, help him to forgive and heal and find happiness again.

Then there was the fury boiling over inside him in the face of the Dalek fleet in Manhattan: she knew he was capable of anger, even violence, but hadn’t seen it this strong since before he regenerated.

He didn’t lose his way, though he stumbled from time to time, showing compassion and offering mercy even to Daleks and the Master when neither party deserved any.

But in the background of everything she saw was a debilitating reality, seeping through his mind and circulating through his body every second of the day: he was never going to see her again. His inner rebel fought against that harsh reality with fantasies of making it back to her to fuel his longer days, but deep down it kept a ferocious hold on his last hopes, slowly breaking him from within.

Watching him crumble was the cruelest torture she could imagine. It threatened to shatter her composure, too, even here and now, entwined in his bed after all this time, because she knew that feeling so intimately. So painfully. And she’d never wish it on anyone, least of all the Doctor.

She thought for sure she’d never see him again, either. At least at first, before there was any hope of developing a device that could cross between universes again.

As a particularly painful memory was conjured with the dark turn of their link, shame rippled through her in hot waves that burned in her chest and behind her cheeks.

She should’ve known it wouldn’t be long before something triggered the memories of her infidelity.
And in the span of only seconds he knew about them all. Every stupid, randy bloke she ever made the mistake of snogging. The tall, well-dressed shadow of his own figure that ended up between her legs only a short hour after she’d met him.

His sweet, comforting kisses slowed to a stop as the devastation rolled off him in waves, and she was in tears again before she could stop herself, mortified by her own actions and blubbering senseless apologies that she knew wouldn’t help.

“Don’t cry,” he whispered, pulling back to see her wet eyes. His hand slid from behind her head to cup her cheek, the pad of his thumb wiping at the droplets.

“I hurt you,” she sobbed. His eyebrows pulled together and his eyes closed, unable to look at her without her seeing through the lie he was about to tell. He sighed, but kept his thumb stroking a soothing rhythm across her cheek and the other hand lower, on her arm, the pain and betrayal still evident from the grimmer parts of his mind.

“Yes,” he finally acknowledged after a long moment, opening his eyes again. “But it’s all right. I can feel it, how you were feeling. You needed someone.”

“I thought I did,” she amended.

“No, you did. It just wasn’t him. People crave intimacy the most when they’re in pain.” He really believed what he was saying, that much was clear, and it made her feel even more guilty that he was so understanding.

“I wish I could take it back.”

“You can’t. It’s done. It doesn’t matter, any of it. All that matters is you’re here now, that we’re together.”

“You didn’t cheat.” She wasn’t going to let him explain this away so easily; she needed some sort of penance.

“Neither did you.” His voice was urgent and his eyes were hard. “You thought I was gone forever, I wasn’t there to be cheated on.” He paused before going on, searching her eyes and her mind for acceptance of his words. “It was just an outlet. You weren’t even thinking straight at the time. And I had opportunities to – well… It’s just a little easier for me to rein in that craving for closeness. I had other outlets, lashed out in other ways, if that wasn’t already obvious.”

“It meant nothing.” More than anything, she wanted him to know that.

“I know,” he whispered, leaning in closer again.

“I thought about you the whole time.”

“I know,” he breathed against her lips, his nose brushing against hers sweetly a few times before he pulled back slightly. “I couldn’t replace you, either. Hard as I tried. I didn’t sleep with anyone but I… thought about it. I kissed a complete stranger.” He briefly showed the story of the ship and Astrid, illustrating her untimely death before Rose could ask why she didn’t end up in bed with him. “I dunno what would’ve happened, if she came along.”

Despite knowing she should feel bad for the woman, dying to allow the Doctor to save the rest of the passengers, her pity was tainted by a surge of jealousy and hurt that she had no right to feel.

“Don’t think like that.” He sensed the jealousy instantly and the words might have seemed like an
admonishment, but his eyes were sad. “It wouldn’t have been the same. It couldn’t have been ‘cause she wasn’t… because I didn’t – ” He stopped the word forming on the tip of his tongue before he could say it, but Rose already knew what it was.

He tried again but failed, only repeating the last two words he said before closing his eyes and huffing in frustration. She could feel it, the sentiment he was getting at rather than a concrete word, brewing between them in the midst of a torrent of unformed words and emotions, heightening through all their points of contact, but she let him have the time he needed.

Cupping her face in his hands, he stared in her eyes with such intensity she thought he must be worried she’d disappear, for so long she wondered if he was going to change his mind about saying it, after all. But then, without so much as blinking, without the slightest stutter or movement of his head, he whispered four syllables in his distinctive archaic language. Four that she’d memorized more than three years before, when he only ever said them within the safety of his mind, six times in all.

She held her breath and her heart crashed against her chest but she waited for him, because he didn’t look finished. His bottom lip wavered between speaking and silence as he opened his mouth but the words didn’t come, not right away.

“You remember.” It wasn’t a question. She nodded slowly, biting her lip and fisting her hands in his wrinkly open shirt in her anxiety.

“Rose.” His voice was soft and soothing and he paused again to let the corner of his mouth lift up in a nervous smile, something inside him shifting as she lay beneath him in anticipation: courage mounting, apology in his eyes and tenderness swirling through their blossoming connection until he finally spoke again, four years of their torturous crescendo culminating in three words.

“It means ‘I love you.’”

She couldn’t breathe and any words of response were most certainly caught in her throat so she just tugged on the collar of his shirt, brought his lips onto hers and kissed him hard. Kissed him like she wanted to devour him whole, like she was trying to meld their bodies together or he was the only thing keeping her alive. Kissed him until moisture was dripping from her eyes again as the words echoed in her ears and he reinforced them with every brush of his lips. Not just that he did now; that he always had and always will.

“Why didn’t you say it before?” she panted in between the bruising kisses.

“I’m a stupid prick,” he answered simply, barely giving himself enough air to finish the thought.

“Got that right.”

They kissed until their lips were chapped and she was gasping for breath, until their hips were grinding lazily against each other to spread the isolated pleasure.

He wiped away the leftover wetness from around her eyes as she caught her breath and he pretended to for her sake, shaky laughter from them both out of sheer bliss.

“Y’know,” she mused, lifting her hips to emphasize the growing hardness between them. “I’ve heard it doesn’t count if we’re about to have sex.” She made sure he knew she was teasing with a lopsided grin.

“Ooh, are we about to?” He teased her back, his voice dipping low with another quick dose of friction between them. “That sounds brilliant.” He planted a sloppy kiss on her neck just under her
ear. “Have to say, though, it’s not the answer a bloke might expect, after pouring his heart out like that. Or two hearts, in my case.”

She laughed again, truly lighthearted this time, but he only put on a mock affronted pout and waited for her to say what he really wanted.

“I love you too. ‘Course I do.” It was so much better this time, when the remnants of tears were those of incredulity and joy, than that first time, when they were about to lose each other and the tears only carried lost time and despair down her cheeks.

He hummed in blissful content as he kissed her softly in thanks, before murmuring the words back to her again, quiet and delicate breathed over her skin, glorious music as they filtered through her ears.

Tenderness surrendered to passion quickly, seams tearing and zippers breaking as their clothes were tossed off the mattress piecewise and their mouths wandered from each other, staking their claims with a new rosy bruise each time more skin was revealed.

“Oh, Rose, I’m not, uhm…” He let his hands fall to the mattress as he pulled back when the last of their clothes made it to the floor. “We’re not… protected. I’m not taking the injections anymore.”

“’M not on anythin’ either,” she confessed.

“Bollocks,” he muttered. “Well, there are condoms in the med bay. If I’m really lucky she’ll bring us some, it’ll just take her a minute.” He nodded upwards to indicate the TARDIS.

“I don’t want to wait a minute.” She was surprised at her own candidness, but it had also been years since she slept with anyone and a few months since she had the energy or desire to even touch herself.

“Actually, uhm, Rose, this might be for the best, ‘cause I wanted to tell you I, erm…” He pulled aggressively on his ear and even though it was endearing as always, she wondered what he was so nervous about. “This might go pretty quick.”

Oh. She hadn’t even thought of that. It was about to be a ‘gone in sixty seconds’ type scenario for her, as well. He rolled off her to prop himself up on his elbow by her side and took in the thoughts she reflected back to him, grinning widely. She might have been just a tad too explicit about how long it had been, and just how badly she was throbbing with need between her legs.

“Hmm,” he breathed, pressing his lips to her neck while his hand smoothed over her hip to venture between her legs. “I think I can do something about that.”

She meant to tell him to shut up but his fingers delved between her folds to graze over her clit and the words flowed into a noisy moan that she tried uselessly to muffle against his shoulder. His heated erection pushed against her hip at the sound, coaxing her to take him in hand and she did so quickly, long, hard strokes along his length earning a low growl in her ear.

Everything seemed to hit her all at once then, the breathtaking way their long-deprived pleasure melded together, the way his teeth were leaving what she hoped would be a permanent mark behind her neck and she finally had him, in her mind and her hand in equal measure and it felt so, so good… him, hot and throbbing hard in her palm and for her, it was like three years had never passed… the pads of his fingers repeating a gentle swirling pattern over her swollen center… whispering through their link to relax, that he was here and always would be, to just release…

She came with a sharp exhale of his name, nails digging into his hip and her hand tightening around his twitching length. Something warm and sticky was painted on her stomach but the lovely,
desperate way he grunted her name made it so she almost didn’t notice, and certainly didn’t care. After returning their breathing to normal they both chuckled in unison, entertained by the world-record speed they might have just set. Embarrassment didn’t come, though, nor did questions about why they didn’t take better care of themselves in their absence; they both already knew. It flowed like the abundance of residual, tingling pleasure through their shared nerve endings – the knowledge that they could take care of each other now (both in the dirty and the proper way).

“Well, that was fast.” She said it out loud just for comic effect, and he giggled against her neck before leaning back to scoop his shirt off the floor.

“I tried to tell you.” He used the sleeve to clean her up.

“So did I.”

His only acknowledgement was a soft hum before he kissed her, his arms wrapping around her and holding her close like he’d never have enough. Soft and shallow at first, chaste strokes of his lips alternating on hers. The patient rhythm quickened as his tongue delved between her lips, the wet glide of their mouths coaxing more warm moisture from her core. A slight angle of his head deepened the kiss further and the bed and the sheets disappeared from beneath her because it was only him, the familiar, distinctly non-human taste of his tongue, the sweet dance of their lips that she craved as she went to sleep at night for so many weeks she stopped counting.

A vision of him lying in her room, eyes closed and mouth twisted in pain, dreaming of the same thing, made tears well up behind her eyes and she grabbed for him, fingers stroking through his hair before securing his cheeks in her hands and kissing him harder. He sighed into her mouth, gratitude that he’d never have to lay alone in her bed again cascading through her, a waterfall churning her own pooled relief until she couldn’t tell them apart. And they just shared and basked in it, floating through the serene pool of their reunion as they made love with their mouths: long, tender kisses carrying promises of deeper forms of affection.

Time went on though, despite how they wanted to freeze the universe and never stop: she confessed she would kiss him forever and he told her she tasted like heaven (none of this out loud, of course). And with the pass of time came heightened anticipation of their postponed proper joining, combined arousal swelling with the constant touches of their exposed bodies, the smooth, warm friction across naked limbs whenever either of them shifted. The desire became so intense neither of them noticed they were moving together again, subtle thrusts of their hips adding a more intimate dimension pleasure to their lengthy kiss.

But then his hand landed on her backside, fingertips digging into the supple flesh and pulling her against him, spreading her legs wider until he slid between her slick folds on a perfectly timed thrust, and their kiss broke as their moans harmonized, high and low.

Suddenly neither of them could drag this out any longer.

“Properly this time, then?” He smiled as he sought permission in her eyes.

She just nodded, still breathing heavily from their long-winded kiss and the quick flood of pleasure.

He rolled away only for a second to throw open the drawer of his nightstand and pull out a familiar packet, his hands folding into a quick prayer of thanks to the TARDIS. Using his teeth to tear the foil, he emptied the contents and stretched the pink material over his length faster than she’d ever seen a bloke do it before.

“Pink?” She giggled a bit as he settled between her legs, and he kissed a sloppy trail from between
her breasts to her chin before what she said registered with him.

“Something funny about that?” He squinted.

“No.” But her laughter betrayed her.

“What?” he squeaked, affronted. “It’s perfect. Pink, like… a rose.”

“That was too cheesy.” He blushed furiously, tucking his chin into his shoulder as he turned away.

“I promise never to say it again if you promise never to bring it up.”

“Deal.”

“It’s just, not like I have a ton of options stored away. I wasn’t exactly, err… expecting this.”

“Doctor, ‘m just jokin’. I don’t care. I couldn’t care less, actually.” She realized something, as she listened closer to him, with their newly restored skin-to-skin contact. “But you do care.” She spoke slowly, working it out while he watched her. “You don’t like ‘em.”

“No, it’s not that. It’s fine. I’m fine. Well, it’s just that – I just… I want to be close to you. As close to you as I can be.” He leaned down to brush his lips over her neck just under her ear. She forgot what the Doctor had started to talk like, towards the end. That he knew how to unleash the suave master of seduction hidden deep inside him somewhere, though his casual walls were still up 95% of the time.

“To remember what it’s like, to feel you around me. I forgot what you feel like, Rose.” He paused every few words to bite lightly on pleasure points of her neck, tugging on the skin with just enough force to send delightful chills though her body. “How hot, and wet and… snug around me.” His lips closed over the shell of her ear, his tongue grazing along the side until he reached her earlobe and pulled it into his mouth with gentle suction.

“Oh, god, it doesn’t matter, does it.” He pressed soft kisses over her cheek. “I just need you, Rose.”

She knew he was struggling too, with the way his rigid member was jutting into the inside of her thigh, his manner of describing why he didn’t like the condom somehow instead convincing them both it wasn’t important. But the last bit tipped her over the edge, all the heat he’d instilled in her suddenly boiling over in incoherent, urgent pleas that he seemed to understand perfectly. In her mind she was saying *I need you, too* even if a little bit of profanity was what came out.

Her fingers twisted in his already wild hair, a little damp with sweat behind his neck and around his ears and she couldn’t help the surge of pride that coursed through her that she could bring out such a human reaction in him. Her heels dug into the small of his back to pull him closer as he prodded her entrance, both of them crying out loud enough for several neighboring rooms to hear (she hoped they’d been moved farther away) as he stretched and filled her.

When he was buried to the hilt he stopped, both of them relishing the way she expanded and clenched rhythmically around him, adjusting to his size after so long apart. God, she could never have remembered how remarkable it was to get both inputs: to get his perspective, what it was like to be hugged so tightly and pulled into her slick warmth. It was something she never imagined would be beautiful, more than a little bit sick of her own anatomy since her first period and never fancying lady bits much. But it was through his eyes, eyes that loved and admired and respected her, that she saw the experience in a new light.

Maybe sex wasn’t supposed to be beautiful all the time. But she’d never experienced it as beautiful at all, until him. Fun? Yeah. Exciting. Felt good. But with him it was just… different from anything she
ever thought sex could be. The intimacy they shared even before the clothes came off, the impossibility of lying to one another, the comforts they were uniquely poised to offer one another, not to mention the mutual attraction that proliferated when they sought pleasure together. And maybe it wouldn’t always be this beautiful for them, maybe it’d get tiring or they’d have their off days, get into bad moods. But she thought if they could achieve it at all, it was something neither of them should ever let go of.

“No, I don’t think we should.” While she was still getting acclimated to having shared wavelengths she didn’t expect a comment from him, mostly because she already knew he agreed anyway. But she was very much on board with this new habit of his, talking more and hiding less. Something about their time apart changed him, for better or worse. It would have consequences she wouldn’t like later, she was sure, but for right now she was going to enjoy the fact he was being honest with her.

“Oh, I’ve missed you Rose.” He smiled sweetly before brushing her hair back from her face, and she thought he might have been holding back tears.

“God, I missed you.” She pulled him down for a tender kiss. “So much.” It was one thing to know a person had missed you, but another entirely to hear the words on their lips. Something about the confession made the person so vulnerable – to the rejection of not having the sentiment reciprocated, to the possibility that perhaps they can live better without you than you can without them. Somehow she thought it might be even more difficult than ‘I love you’ itself, especially for him.

When he started to move she called out his name, the intense surge of pleasure from the envelope of delicious friction around him complementing the way he filled and stretched her walls to bond them together. It had been so long that it might have hurt, but he monitored the line between pleasure and pain with care, taking it slow and steady, savoring each thrust inside her, searching for the right angle, shifting his hips and rearranging her legs around him.

With everything that had happened, it was impossible to keep dark thoughts from mingling with the indulgence and relief. Nightmarish memories of a volcano raining fire and ash, of debilitating nausea and horror-filled streets on failed jumps, stalked them from the depths of their minds. Guilt weighed on him heavily, faces of people he couldn’t save haunting him in a far corner of his mind, the reasons Martha had to leave him plaguing his conscience (oh... she thought). She still thought of all the people she manipulated and lied to to get the cannon finished, the guilt of her own at the recollection of the bloke from the bar, the bone-chilling images of seeing him pale white on a stretcher. Remnants of loneliness and grief lingered in their minds, so many months spent knowing that they would never make it back to one another but lacking a clue as to where to even begin accepting that fact.

They could barely stand to experience the fragments of missing years through the raw shards that pierced their link, but in the end it only made it stronger. She held onto him tighter and he peppered kisses along her forehead and cheeks; he whispered reassurances in her ear and she echoed them louder in her mind, knowing it was the way he preferred.

In a curving, tangled golden line sprawling from his mind she could see them: holding hands, landing on planets she’d never seen before, taking down purple aliens with nothing but his screwdriver and her Torchwood (and Estate) training. The road twisted ominously before anything substantial could show itself and suddenly she understood how he saw time, as something fathomable but malleable, tangible while being unpredictable.

She was excited. He was worried.

She promised nothing bad would happen to them anymore. He held her tight, sped up his thrusts and tried with all his energy to trust her.
She was never going to leave him, especially not now, when she could live just as long as he would: the long-obtrusive barrier of mortality between them finally demolished.

The grim thoughts were soon overtaken with growing pleasure as her hips started to meet his, taking him deeper, their exhalations of praise louder and more frequent, spurring them both on. The worries and fears temporarily vanished with the decadence of being reunited, wrapped in a warm quilt of each other, and they were soon overwhelmed with the mélange of sensations. His forehead rested uneasily against hers as his thrusts came harder, her hands on his rear to bring him as deep as he could go, both of them doing everything they could to eliminate the boundaries between their bodies, letting their hearts be mended by the union, physical and emotional.

He couldn’t reach between them like this so he changed the angle again until he rubbed her in just the right way with every motion of his hips.

Galaxies swirled and burst behind their eyes as they reached their climax, cries of their names almost too loud in the tiny space between them as the crests of pleasure washed through their limbs. It wasn’t something a person could truly remember in vivid detail, how gorgeous a truly shared orgasm really was, the blinding explosion of nerve endings buzzing with doubled sensations, the shivers and spasms of two lovers in harmony. Their duet of sighs and moans softened and quieted as they rode out the diminishing waves of warm, numbing pleasure seeping from fingertips to toes.

He kissed her soundly once they were finally still, and she felt warm lines of moisture on his cheeks that made her forehead scrunch in worry.

She tried to pull away to ask what was wrong, but he swiped a thumb over her closed lid, gathering hot moisture of her own with the motion.

Rather than feel embarrassed or pathetic (as they perhaps should have if circumstances were different), they just relished the tender moment, murmuring reassurances from within their link and tightening their hold on one another as they let the tears run their course. Too many emotions were brewing through the evening, and in a moment of such physical ecstasy they all erupted onto the surface. They didn’t dwell on it or try to figure out whose came first, only lingered in the soft kiss and mutual embrace until their eyes were dry.

Don’t worry, it’s very, very human, she reminded him. He smiled against her lips despite himself.

So, I can be… honorary human, perhaps?

He rolled onto his side as he separated them, quickly discarding the condom before nestling onto the pillow next to hers and sniffling for the last time.

“So tell me what really happened inside the TARDIS.” He brushed a lock of hair behind her ear as he asked, huddling closer and propping himself on his elbow.

“Hmm… well you saw some of it, yeah? She was about to explode, but then I looked at your hand, the one in the jar that you used to regenerate, ‘s like it was callin’ me.’” He listened intently, the back of his hand stroking along her cheek as he stared at her like he might extract the story faster, like it was written on her pupils. “There was nothin’ else I could do, so I crawled over to it. But when I touched it, there was this bright light, and I was in so much pain… like I was getting’ burned. I thought it was the end, that I was gonna die inside the TARDIS. But next thing I knew she was tellin’ me what to do, how to use the controls to save us both.”

“Some sort of remnant from when you were the Bad Wolf, maybe?” he volunteered, his eyebrows pulling together. “How else could she communicate with you?”
“That’s what I was thinkin’, yeah. But… it also doesn’t make sense how I was able to understand what you were tellin’ me to do, later.”

“Good point.” He puffed out his cheeks in a long exhale. “Did it seem weird, at the time, or are you only realizing that you shouldn’t have known right now?”

“It didn’t seem weird, no. But thinking back, I have no idea what I was even saying. None of it makes any sense anymore.”

“Blimey, I dunno. Might be since you were technically in the first few hours of a regeneration cycle? That would be a technicality though, since you didn’t regenerate, you only absorbed the energy. But a surge of energy like that could theoretically supercharge the neurons in your brain, making you temporarily very, very clever. Well, it’s not impossible. And it’s the only explanation I can think of.”

“So this hasn’t happened to anyone else?”

“Well, I have seen this sort of thing before, species normally incapable of regeneration gaining the capacity in a freak accident… Mawdryn, the Minyans, and one human, Chris. Just not quite under these circumstances. In every case, there was some level of force involved in taking the regeneration energy that led to some unintended consequences. Sometimes the regenerations could be mutated, even grotesque, as punishment for stealing what was considered a Time Lord privilege.” She gawked at him in obvious terror, praying this wasn’t the fear that was eating him up the whole time, but he shook his head.

“This has to be different, though. There isn’t an indefinitely supply of regeneration energy contained in your genetic code, and there shouldn’t be any horrific mutations involved, seeing as the energy came from me. I’ve never regenerated into a cripple or a freak. Not yet, anyway.”

She couldn’t believe this was even possible, that she could… What sort of possibilities did this bring?

“So… it came from you, yeah? What if I, like… turn into you, or something?”

He was in stitches for a while, at that, and she couldn’t help but join in after giving up scowling at him.

“So, you said ‘s not unlimited, though. Is yours?”

“No, I was given thirteen regenerations, all Time Lords are. I have two left. Which means you do too.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yep.” He popped the ‘p’, his eyes completely certain he was right and their inherent lie detector coming up negative.

“What’s it like, regenerating?”

“It hurts. It’s terrifying. It’s probably the worst thing I can imagine, and the thought of you having to go through it makes me feel sick, to be honest.”

“Doctor, I’ll be fine. You’ll be there with me, yeah?”

“Yeah,” he said curtly, starting to take responsibility for what happened to her and shut himself down; she’d put a stop to that this instant.
“Doctor, this is a good thing. So what if it hurts a bit? It’s fast. It means I don’t have to leave you. Isn’t that what you want? To not have to watch me die?”

“Rose, I’m still gonna have to watch you die. When your body dies everything about you dies with it, you’ll become a new woman. You may not even want to be around me anymore, when it happens.”

“Now that’s just bein’ a hypocrite! When you regenerated, nothin’ about your feelings for me changed, did they?”

He was silent, but his mind was screaming a thousand things at once.

“Did they?”

“No,” he interjected. “I practically imprinted on you that day, when I was reborn in this body, all right. You’re right. It shouldn’t change how you feel about me. I shouldn’t have said that. But, just because we have the same number of regenerations doesn’t mean they’ll happen at the same time. How can we live like that, knowing any day one of us could turn into someone else, leaving the other one behind in their previous body?”

“Why can’t we make sure they’re together? I’ll do it if you will, Doctor. Go together, every time. If we die, or, if we change at the same time, does it still scare you?” He was silent again for a long moment, horrible thoughts she instilled in his mind about the possible lethal situations that would end their lives assaulting him from inside.

“Yes.”

“But –”

“Rose, you have no idea what you’re saying.”

“Then what do you suggest?” she nearly shouted in frustration. She knew this conversation was going to be hard, but after everything that they’d confessed, she didn’t expect him to condescend her like this.

“I’m not being condescending. You’re talking about death. Yours, mine. You’re talking about potentially sacrificing yourself, willingly jumping in front of a bullet, just to fit with this insane lifestyle I have, and you’ve been cursed with.”

“So what are you saying, then?” The tears were flowing again, hurt and fear supplying them this time.

“I don’t know.” He rubbed his thumb and index finger over his own reddened eyes, wiping moisture away from them, too.

“Don’t say you want me to leave.” Her voice was so tiny in the midst of his pessimism she knew it must sound pathetic.

“Rose. Never.” He took her face in both his hands and spoke like he’d never say anything more important in all his lives. “Don’t even say it. Don’t even think it. Ever.”

“I’m sorry.” She sniffled, fighting back the tears before they broke free again.

“No, I’m sorry. I just… don’t know what to do.”
“We don’t have to figure it all out tonight. But we will, we’ve got lots of time now.” They did, in theory. And she didn’t want their first night together to be bogged down with decisions about the future and all the downsides of her new biology.

“Yeah.” He nodded, closing his eyes before pulling her against his chest for a crushing hug.

Their minds grew calm as they both agreed and accepted worrying about the hard parts later and just being here with each other tonight. They held each other for a long moment, squelching new fears as they arose silently, soft kisses against his shoulder and wet ones on her neck.

It wasn’t that the first time wasn’t satisfying enough. More that it was so good and so healing the urge to do it again ignited and sparked between them in their exposed embrace until their kisses became messy and passionate. New purplish marks appeared around her breasts and his neck until he was straining hard against her stomach and before long had to reach into that drawer for the second time.

They were tired, mentally and physically. Their lovemaking was slow, his thrusts measured and deliberate. The licks of pleasure took longer to build between them, satisfied as they already were, but he was patient and she was relaxed beneath him, calmed by the gentle, unhurried pace. They could truly just enjoy the intimacy, take their time roaming skin they’d both missed with their hands. She could suck on that sensitive spot on his neck in time to his thrusts and he whispered how good she felt in her ear, brushed messy open kisses to her lips every few minutes.

Slowly, deliciously, the subtle pleasure of their closeness and unity of their movements escalated to a more indulgent, concentrated pleasure, trickling from their waists to the tips of their fingers. His thumb wedged between them to find her clit and draw light circles over the swollen, hypersensitive bud. Tension mounted so slowly it was hardly noticeable that they were pulling the rope too taut, that it was going to snap. Basking in the slow, quiet pleasure without the frenzy or urgency of before, they stoked the flames with caresses of hands and lips, special attention to sensitive spots recruiting nerve endings from all over their skin to join the imminent finale.

The tension built so gradually, over such a longer period of time, their muscles more relaxed and bodies more sated, that when it snapped it was overwhelming. Before either of them realized how close they’d become to the peak of their climb, they stumbled over it together, desperate, breathy praises and a chorus of their names filling the room. He jerked erratically through his last few thrusts and she writhed beneath him with the molten bliss gushing from where they were joined.

He crumpled on top of her, gasping into the pillow as she caught her breath against his shoulder. She rubbed soothing circles into his shoulder blades, massaging out the tension from holding himself over her for so long, and stroked her heels down the backs of his thighs (maybe his arse, too, a little bit). Their connection still crackled and glowed with residual waves of staggering pleasure but she was able to make out eight mumbled syllables against the pillow.

“What was that?” she whispered.

He finally lifted his head to repeat them to her face, confirming they weren’t in English.

“What’s it mean?” She rested her palm on his rosy cheek, damp sweat on his skin and tiny beads of it collected on his sideburns.

“It doesn’t directly translate. I think the best I can come up with is ‘no one knows me like you do.’”

“Wow, Doctor, don’t try and flatter me with your post-shagging talk,” she teased.
“I promise, it sounds better in High Gallifreyan!” He sounded genuinely apologetic that his meaning didn’t come across correctly.

“Well, I won’t believe a word of it. You’re loopy.” She poked him in the forehead, admittedly a bit loopy herself.

He groaned as he rolled away from her to toss the second condom across the room into the bin by his desk. He missed and with a louder groan hopped off the bed to discard it properly.

“I’ll come up with something better next time,” he promised as he pulled the duvet over them both and gathered her back up in his arms. She snuggled into him without seeing him, her eyelids too heavy to open.

“Doctor, ’m so tired.”

“I know. It’s been an exhausting day. An exhausting few years, really.” His voice quieted with each word, until the whisper barely reached her ears as she faded quickly with the cocktail of hormones swimming through her body. “Go to sleep. I’ll be here when you wake up.” It was all she was conscious of before she succumbed to slumber.

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It felt like a week later she was wrenched from sleep by obnoxious banging on the door. It was consistent, forceful, rhythmic. And didn’t seem to be letting up.

“Hellooooooooooo,” drawled a distinctly American voice from the other side of the wood.

“Oh, God,” she mumbled, burrowing closer into the Doctor’s warm chest.

“What does he want,” the Doctor mumbled back.

“Doctorrrrrrrr,” he called again, but neither of them moved or said a word, and the banging resumed. They continued to ignore it, or at least try to, but she was mostly awake after a few long seconds of the noise and was pretty sure the Doctor was, too.

“All right, I’m coming in,” he announced.

“What?” she gasped as her eyes flew open and she sat up to glance at the door just as the handle started to turn. The Doctor sat up with her and quickly pulled the duvet up over her chest before the man appeared from behind the door.

“Soxxx,” he drawled, a huge, toothy grin on his face. “You two lovebirds are awake, after all. Do you even know what time it is?”

“Jack!” the Doctor shouted, unleashing the angry eyebrows. “How’d you even get in here?”

“It was unlocked.” He shrugged, missing or purposefully ignoring the Doctor’s tacit, arguably more important question: why did you come in here.

“Well, ’s rude to just… barge in on people like that!” Rose interjected.

“I knocked for ten minutes.” He crossed his arms over his (impressively wide) chest, raising his eyebrows in accusation. “See you two have been busy. Nice love bites, by the way.” He leaned his head to either side, examining what skin was visible for more. Blushing furiously, she pulled the blanket up to her chin and turned to the Doctor’s fully exposed torso to find at least six at first glance.
“Good luck hiding those from Jackie and Pete.” He laughed to himself while the Doctor pulled the blanket over his chest and neck, too, and Rose just hoped his usual suit-and-tie getup would cover all of them.

“What do you want, Jack?” the Doctor barked, his patience snapping.

“It’s sixteen hundred hours, sir. There are some of us who need to get home.” He spoke like a military man now, dropping the playfulness and rather convincing her that they really should get out of bed, after all.

“Rubbish. Time is relative on the TARDIS. I can drop anyone off whenever they need. Thought you’d have finally learned that by now.” My, the Doctor was sassy in the mornings now.

“Well, there’s also the fact that we haven’t been able to find the kitchen. Kids are hungry, you know how it is.”

The Doctor sighed, rubbing a hand down his face.

“All right, give us a tick then, we’ll be right out.” He shooed the thicker man out the door with a threatening gesture of his hand.

“Sorry, Jack,” Rose called before he could turn to leave, her voice small.

“Don’t apologize, Rose,” the Doctor warned in quiet tones as Jack left the room anyway, a smirk on his face.

“That man.” The Doctor shook his head as the door closed behind Jack.

“Doctor, what’s the big deal? Everyone was gonna find out, anyway. Jack’s like that with everyone, y’know. He didn’t mean t’be rude about it, ’m sure.” He sighed gruffly before answering.

“Fine, yes, I know.”

“Since when are you grumpy in the morning?” she teased, poking him in the leg with her big toe.

“I am not grumpy. I just… wasn’t ready to share you yet.”

Oh, what a line.

“Oi, better watch the sweet-talkin’, mister, or when you really need it, ’s not gonna work on me anymore.”

He stopped her argument with a searing kiss that put sweet-talking and Jack to the very back of her mind. The roughness of his chin was even more pronounced this morning – she’d never kissed him like this and it was a bit exciting. It must have been more than a day since he shaved last: he never had stubble like this those few mornings they woke up together before it all went sour. He hummed in her mouth as his hand brought her still-naked form against his own under the covers before tracing the curve of her bum. She was more than a little worried about what he might taste in her mouth at the moment and the fact that she hadn’t showered the night before, but he hooked her leg around his waist and she felt him already hard against her center.

She gasped.

“Doctor, I – I dunno. I think we’d better get out there, yeah? Friends are waitin’ on us. She rolled out from his grasp and sat up, but she looked back to find a disheveled, crestfallen Doctor looking like a
dog that got its bone taken away. She rolled her eyes with a sigh.

“'Kay, then. How 'bout we get in the shower, see what happens?” She wagged her eyebrows at him and stood up, quite enjoying the way he salivated at the sight of her bare body. He tossed the duvet to the side and scrambled out of bed with renewed purpose and she fled for the bathroom, only making it a few steps before he caught up with her and scooped her up in his arms from behind.

He turned on the water to the shower and they brushed their teeth in sync, still stealing glances at each other’s bum and trying to count just how many marks they’d left the night before. She told him she loved his bed hair (which was literally sticking out in all directions) and he said ‘same to you’ through a mouthful of foam.

The shower took a bit longer than it was supposed to. Well, the actual cleaning up bit was fast. The time she spent sitting on the coral ledge of the shower, though, his hard length in her mouth and his hands in her soaking hair, was a little longer. And the bath that they decided on afterward, when he brought her to climax with his tongue while she floated in the fragrant, warm water – that took a bit of time, too.

Of course, things between them could only stay unpolled by grim thoughts for so long.

“Rose, you’re going to outlive your family.” The blade against his jaw stopped its path through the white cream spread over his face as he met her eyes in the mirror, where she was applying her makeup.

She turned to him with sadness in her eyes.

“Doctor, why would you even bring that up now?”

“I just want you to know what you’re signing up for,” he continued, gesturing with his razor-wielding arm. “That and I… I had a nightmare.”

“Doctor – ”

“Rose, I couldn’t live with myself if you ever regretted this. I know it’s not my fault, but… if you had never fallen for me this would never have happened. You’d still be a regular human. How are you even going to tell them?” He waved his arm about so intensely she had to walk over and stop his arm out of fear he would fling the razor across the loo.

“I’m not going to regret staying with you. Ever.”

“What if you start to hate me, once they’re gone. What if you get tired of me, wish you had them back?” She’d seen the Doctor’s vulnerability come out before, but he’d never been so vocal about his fears before.

“I could never hate you. I get bloody angry with you, sometimes. And sometimes I think I hate you, but I don’t. I never could. ’S gonna be hard, awful even. If I do outlive them. But we can’t dwell on death, Doctor. Neither of us, ’s not healthy. We have to enjoy life while it lasts. ’Sides, we can watch Tony grow up, and, maybe he’ll even have a family of his own… or maybe, we could…”

“No.” His voice was firm as soon as he saw the direction her thoughts were headed.

“Yeah, ‘course not, I wouldn’t expect… not after, I mean… I understand…”

“No, it’s not that. If we had a child, or if I did with anyone, for that matter – it would be half human, half Gallifreyan, yes. But not Time Lord. It’s a rank. Regenerations are bestowed after the title is
earned.”

Her eyes welled with tears as she covered her mouth with her hands when she understood what that would mean.

“I’m sorry,” he said simply, his eyes dropping to the floor.

“Doctor, you’re not cursed to be alone.” She plucked the razor out of his hand and set it on the counter so she could interlock their fingers and hold his hands tight. “There are kids all over the universe that need lookin’ after. And Tony’s gonna love you, I’m sure.”

“Yeah,” he smiled weakly for her benefit.

“Doctor, d’you want me to stay with you?”

“Yes,” he answered immediately, squeezing her hands. “Are you doubting that?” His forehead scrunched in anxiety, reassurance flowing through their hands to her heart so quickly it was overwhelming.

“Then promise me. Promise me we’re gonna stick together. ‘M not sayin’ it’s gonna be easy, but whatever happens, we’ll work it out, and you won’t blame yourself for every bad thing that happens to me, or to us. And you won’t keep thinkin’ I regret choosing a life with you. And you will not go sacrificin’ yourself for me. Y’hear?” Her bottom lip was wobbling dangerously by the time she finished her tirade of commands, tears streaming down her cheeks that he wiped away with his thumbs as he answered without hesitation.

“I promise.”

She could feel that, the answer resonating within him and flowing honestly to her through their linked fingers, that as afraid as he was of losing her or having to watch her endure any more death, he was going to try. To do everything he could to work through their unique, distinctly non-human problems together, rather than on his own. His stomach was still unsettled by the downturn of their conversation and the memory of his nightmare, but his hearts soared with nervous excitement that what she told him all those years ago was no longer an optimistic lie. She really was never going to leave him.

“No, ‘m not,” she choked out, through half a giggle and half a sob.

“I love you,” he breathed as he brought his face closer to hers. Tempting as it was, she pushed him away with her hands on his still-bare chest.

“No way, you’ve still got shaving cream all over your face!” She laughed as she picked up the razor and put it back in his hand. He turned to the mirror with an exaggerated frown, shaking his head in disbelief that she would care. It was even funnier when his hair was still laying damp and flat on his head but she held back further giggles.

“Promise, I’ll kiss you when you’re done.” She hugged him from behind, arms wrapping around his stomach as she pressed her lips to the middle of his back, careful not to jostle him enough to disturb the blade against his face.

“Well,” he drawled. “I should hope so. You have to make sure it’s smooth enough for me.”

She certainly did.

When they finally had their fill of more kissing (and he pouted until she remembered she never
returned his most recent ‘I love you’), they had a bit of recon to do. He fixed up his hair in its new style (that she was quite fond of) and she left her hair down to cover most of her neck. The Doctor buttoned up his collar and wore a tie, but Rose didn’t have time to test out her cover-up on a couple of the still-visible marks on the back of his neck before someone was banging on their door again.

“Well, never mind that, then. Let’s go and see how everyone’s doing.”

To neither of their surprise, Jackie was positively scandalized when confronted with the evidence, and everyone else just had a good laugh. She and the Doctor reclaimed a sense of domesticity as they cooked a very tardy breakfast for the crowd of guests, a parting gift before dropping them all at separate destinations.

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“Think they’ll like it?” the Doctor asked as they looked back at the sprawling mansion from the threshold of the TARDIS.

“I still don’t know how you managed to swing this.” Rose shook her head in amazement.

“He owed me a favor.” He shrugged.

“A big favor, apparently.”

“Eh.” He grimaced, recalling a story she’d have to extract from him later, before restoring a neutral expression as he gazed at the sun setting over her family’s new home.

“Think they’ll get settled in here all right?” he asked. “I didn’t think how hard this would be, especially for your dad. Made quite a name for himself over there.”

“Mhm. Dad’s priorities have changed quite a bit. Long as he’s got Jackie and Tony, he’s gonna do fine.”

“Which offer d’you think he’ll take?” he prodded.

“I’m not sure he and Jack got on very well. But Martha sure made a good impression on him, and spoke more than highly of U.N.I.T. He’ll probably end up there.”

“Well, we better keep an eye out then,” he muttered almost inaudibly as he swerved around to head towards the console, letting the door shut itself.

“Oi!” she shouted, following him with a swatting arm that easily dodged before pulling her into a short, tender kiss.

“So, Rose Tyler,” he began, just like old times as he began to ready levers and press buttons, wagging his eyebrows at her and grinning with wild excitement. “Where to?”
SIX MONTHS LATER

“Urgh!” the Doctor growled to the shadows of endless sand and black water beyond his haven of temporary light. He’d just situated the last of the glass lanterns in a square around the supersized blanket, only to realize he should have done those before laying this out. Little patches of sand spotted the blue fabric near the edges, and his feet had tracked a fair amount across the middle with all his rearranging.

Sand just wouldn’t do for what he had planned.

He walked around the blanket for several minutes, brushing the rough granules from the fabric with his forearm, but in the end he only succeeding in knocking over a lantern with his foot and spreading most of the sand into a thin layer across the entire lumpy surface of the blanket.

As his final effort, he scooped up the entire blanket, bundling it (and much more sand than there was to begin with) in his arms, carrying it several paces from the arranged lanterns, and unfurling it. The first forceful shake, however, mixed with the oncoming wind and only blew sand in his eyes. With another frustrated groan he dropped the blanket entirely, wincing and rubbing uselessly at his burning eyes for a few seconds before an idea occurred to him.

He dashed the short distance back to the rock surface where the TARDIS was parked with renewed vigor, hoping Rose would still be in the shower and this minor setback would go unnoticed.

A quick peek into their bedroom revealed no Rose to be found and a thin trail of steam billowing from the half-open door to their en suite, so he continued his way down the hall. His Chucks skidded to a stop when he found the nearest storage room three times closer than usual, and vocally praised his ship when a spare mattress was the first thing greeting him when he flung open the door.

It was substantially more difficult to barrel down the hallways while carrying an oversized mattress, but somehow he managed with only a couple harmless stumbles. He burst out the doors and trudged back through the sand, arranging their makeshift bed in the frame created by the glowing lanterns, careful not to kick up any sand in the process.
Making sure he stood away from the direction of the light breeze this time, he shook the remaining sand off their blanket a safe distance away before spreading it over the mattress. Carefully perching himself in the center of the bed, he surveyed his handiwork.

It was perfect.

Crinkles of brilliant white moonlight glinted off the dark water, a distorted reflection of its shape in the cloudless sky. If not for the nearby bustle of Los Angeles, the dim stars would be much brighter, but he didn’t think she would mind. The air was warm, lingering heat from the sun radiating from the sand and the nearby rocks, but it was tempered by the cool breeze drifting from the shore, swirling in harmony against his skin. The soft orange light from his everlasting glass lanterns illuminated the bed but not much else, as romantic a setting as he could possibly think of, especially on such short notice.

She was going to love it. And really, he could use a relaxing setting for a change, too.

But he couldn’t pass another moment staring out at the water. He leapt from the mattress to go and meet Rose, kicking up sand to his waist the whole way.

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When she’d asked the Doctor for someplace peaceful, someplace romantic that they could take their minds off Mars and viruses and relax together, she wasn’t sure what to expect.

But when he was towing her from their room immediately as she emerged from the shower, out of their room and then out of the ship altogether, wet hair, socially unacceptable jim-jams and all, she grew a bit anxious about his plans.

She stepped barefoot into warm sand, though, and her mouth fell open at the sight. In the warm tangerine glow of dozens of glass rectangles was a proper mattress with a perfectly TARDIS blue blanket, begging to be occupied. As the Doctor hurried excitedly over with the two pillows and extra blanket he’d brought, arranging them as he saw fit, she stood immobilized, trying to take it all in.

To either side were towering cliffs of rocks, perfectly secluding this chunk of the beach from any potential onlookers. Tiny waves crashed in a ceaseless rhythm at the shore only a short distance from where she stood, strips of white foam in stark contrast to the nearly black sea blending with the dark night sky, stretching to infinity. The breeze was cool but not so much that it chilled her still-damp skin and dripping hair; it felt like a summer evening somewhere almost tropical.

She couldn’t help but smile from ear to ear as he rose up on his knees from the center of the bed, holding his arms out to her, beckoning her to join him.

Before she had skipped halfway to him, though, he was scrambling off the mattress again.

“Oh, hold on! I forgot to show you the best part!” He grabbed her hand with the enthusiasm he’d been missing, and though she understood how tough these last few weeks had been on him, she was glad to see him returning to his normal, bubbly self. She ran with him with carefree laughter as he led them north along the sand near the edge of the water, where the rock face opened up to a small strip of sand leading beyond their inlet of privacy. He stopped as soon as they both had a good view of what was beyond.

“There.” He pointed ambiguously to a sprawling shoreline of twinkling lights, glowing windows, and pairs of headlights on a distant highway, where the skyscape curved to the right and a very, very obvious Ferris wheel stood out against the dark blue sky.

“No… is this…” she started.
“It’s the closest I could get us with some measure of privacy.”

It was the pier they’d danced on all those years ago, when they’d only just begun to test the waters of a more-than-platonic relationship, when their mental connection was only an exciting possibility rather than a work in progress, and they’d only shared a single handful of kisses. Everything was so new, so magical… so frustrating.

“Are we even allowed to be here?” She asked, tugging herself out of her reminiscing.

“Well,” he drawled. “The public beaches close at sundown. But I think between these rocks here is just the place to avoid being seen by the police that patrol the shoreline. Well, and I made sure they just did a round about, oh, thirty minutes ago. We should have plenty of time before anyone thinks to check here again.” The devious gleam in his eyes told her he was thinking exactly what she was.

It was perfect.

Well, nearly perfect. There was just one thing missing.

“Doctor, ‘s that a shark!?” She gasped as she pointed emphatically over the water.

“What!? That’s impossible, sharks never come this close to the shore in Southern – ” As soon as his back was turned, seeking a nonexistent triangular fin, she was running. Rather, she was jogging very slowly through the thick sand, kicking up mounds of the stuff with each labored step.

The soft thud and slide of his footfalls joined hers in seconds, both their laughter echoing off the opposing rock face as he chased her with open arms, and she constantly looked over her shoulder for her pursuer.

It was only perhaps fifty feet to the bed, but he caught up with her as she dashed the final stretch, tackling her into the blanket before she could leap off the other side. She was still giggling like mad but the Doctor’s mouth covered hers, her laughter dissolving to a soft hum against his lips. The kiss was warm with excitement, slow and wet and sensual and she realized, desperate. His mind was starved for hers even after hardly twelve hours apart, and she opened to him immediately, her hands groveling for a grip in his hair while he cradled her close to his body.

Waves of his charming boyish excitement from their brief frolic in the sand almost completely washed the slate clean; only faded views and scraps of the flooding metal base and cracked skin were showing through. But as the threads of their minds so effortlessly intertwined, aligning like matching strands of DNA, so quickly and perfectly and intimately now after the months of practice, she could see the choice would haunt him for years.

“Doctor,” she panted, breaking from the kiss to press her forehead against his, sacrificing none of the intimacy of the moment. “I know ‘s hard to hear, but we made the right decision, the consequences would have – ”

“I know,” he whispered, the pain of that knowledge flowing profusely through their link. “But I didn’t bring us here to talk about it. I don’t want to think about it tonight. I just want to forget. I want us both to forget. You’re the only thing that matters to me tonight.”

Blimey, he’d learned how to sweet talk.

She could feel the effort he expended to clear his mind of all thoughts except what was around him – the waves, the sand, the lanterns, and her.

Words suddenly an inadequate form of expression, she kissed him again, taking his face in her hands
in fervent agreement of his proposal.

In the soft, flickering light of the lanterns, they reminisced on their first time on this shore together as layers were slowly removed. They were patient in their journey to please one another, emptying their minds of thoughts of Mars and losing themselves in the sensations. Sighs and moans mingled with the rhythmic crashing of small waves on wet sand as they reached their peak, fingers interlocked and foreheads touching because no level of contact was enough.

It seemed like hours of lazy kisses later they were wrapped in a tender embrace beneath the second blanket, staring at the bright moon high in the sky between dozing as they fought heavy lids.

But of course, she should have known this wouldn’t last all night.

A bluish light bright enough to blind her shone behind her closed eyes far too soon, illuminating their bed, the sand, and even the surrounding rocks, making the Doctor’s setup of lanterns pale in comparison. Someone was shouting something incomprehensible through a megaphone, and the Doctor shot up from his state of half-consciousness, squinting and blocking the light from his eyes with his arm.

“Who’s ‘at!!?” she shouted, slurring in her state of exhaustion.

“That’d be the coast guard,” he assessed, just as she realized the light source was indeed coming from a boat far out on the water. Instead of continuing parallel to shore as it had been, it was now heading straight for them.

“Run!” He scrambled off the bed without even bothering to put clothes back on, knocking two lanterns into the sand in his rush. She rolled off the bed and took off after him, in the same degree of nakedness.

“Doctor, the lanterns! Y’can’t just leave ‘em, it’ll start a fire!”

“Sand doesn’t catch fire Rose!” He turned around to take her hand before they both started full speed towards the TARDIS. “But not to worry, anyway, those lanterns don’t even have real flames. Special, from the 43rd century!”

“What about your mattress! And I liked that blanket!”

“I don’t really fancy meeting the coast guard in my current state of undress, d’you?” He chuckled and huffed as he talked, still at as close to a sprint as they could get slogging through sand.

She didn’t bother answering because of course he was right, nothing they could say would explain away this situation to whatever authority was about to step out onto shore. They had other blankets, after all. And other clothes, she supposed.

By the time they were inside, though, and the Doctor was circling the console completely starkers so they could flee the scene of the crime, Rose was in stitches against the door.

Once they were safely in the vortex, the Doctor was, too.

Once they’d had their fill and had sunk to the grating to catch their breath, Rose finally spoke again.

“I really did like those shorts, though,” she mused, remembering they’d also left their clothes. Somehow it only made the Doctor start up laughing again.

They laughed themselves near to tears at the door against each other’s shoulders before they finally
headed back down the hall to their room for a proper night’s sleep.

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Donna had initially insisted they take some time to themselves, to get “reacquainted”, as she’d put it. He supposed he understood the sort of awkwardness she wanted to avoid, especially after what happened on that beach (it still made him chuckle). Martha was certainly settled in her new life at U.N.I.T., Mickey had no intentions of tagging along with them anymore, and he essentially forbade Jack from ever lingering longer than a couple hours.

So most of the time, they didn’t have other companions.

They had an arrangement with Donna, of course. They picked her up every couple of months her time for a few weeks in the TARDIS, the destinations up to her. He couldn’t ever really dump his best mate back on Earth without ever looking back, and he was fairly certain she’d find a way to kill him if he tried. She got on brilliantly with Rose, and regardless of where their whims took them, none of them was ever the dreaded “third wheel” on a bicycle. They worked more like a tricycle that was always intended to have three wheels, for as long as Donna wanted to stay.

Donna and Rose often stayed up late talking in the kitchen or the media room (mostly discussions in which he’d much rather not participate), often leaving him to wander and tinker. To idly wonder how he survived their first couple of years together avidly pretending to enjoy fiddling with mechanics more than being with her.

It was much more than worth it, though, to see them get along. He always knew they would. And Rose always more than made up for any missed amorous opportunities.

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They found a way to communicate from a distance. Just two small objects capable of transmitting telepathic wavelengths a few hundred feet at the press of a button, something they picked up together in a marketplace (decked in sunglasses and silly hats that made them a dead giveaway as foreigners). It was extremely helpful when they needed to split up, to the point that it was almost tolerable for him to let Rose out of his sight (almost).

His promise to stop being overprotective and making decisions for her was, at first, the only thing stopping him from tying them together with a rope. Losing her once was enough for the rest of his lifetimes and more, a mistake he couldn’t let happen again; he’d rather face a permanent death. But soon into their travels he was acutely and repeatedly reminded that Rose was both fiercely independent and able to defend herself, even more so now with the physical and mental training from Torchwood.

And after a few months, he began to stop worrying so much.

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The instinct returned with renewed strength, however, when they were confronted with a familiar face that he had implored the universe for an entire year Rose would never have to meet. Reining it in, once he found out the Master was back and demented as ever, was one of the hardest things he had to do in his life. But before long he realized Rose was rather indispensable in a crisis, thinking on her feet even better than she did in their first couple years together, using her uniquely human impulses to save them both from being kidnapped at the last moment.

Better yet, she pulled Wilfred out of harm’s way just before he got locked in a glass radiation case.
She offered him the reassurance he needed when the Time Lords threatened to return from the grave, reminded him that no one else was going to die that day. That no one ever needed to die to set things right. A reminder he sorely needed when he was faced with a harrowing reminder of the worst day of his past, manifest and threatening him in a way he thought was impossible.

Of course, they didn’t know it at the time, but neither of them would be able to erase the memory of the Master sacrificing himself for years.

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“I don’t want to lose you,” Rose whispered against his chest as they lay tangled together after the debacle, fingers clenching on his back.

He asked what she meant, stupidly. Because he already knew what she meant, sensing it through the weakly sizzling ties of their fresh, rather rough session of lovemaking: regeneration, the inevitable transformation of bodies they would both have to endure at some point. The looming, undefined date in their future frightened her, and she exposed the full force of that fear to him in that moment.

“We came very close today, didn’t we?” He spoke gravely, the question more rhetorical than anything.

“Isn’t there any way we can stay… us? You did it once before.” He understood. He really, truly did. As horrified as he was with the events of the day, though, and as much dread filled his hearts at the prospect of changing again, of watching her die and become someone else before his eyes, he’d already had this argument with himself, and he knew there was no way around it.

“I’ve considered it too, but I’m not sure there is. The only thing compatible with regeneration energy like mine – or, like ours – is substantial genetic material of the same type. Aside from lopping off more limbs, which theoretically we could do, but that I would never –”

“I’d do it,” Rose interrupted.

“Rose, don’t be ridiculous.” He sounded upset even to his own ears as he pulled away from her, sitting up on the bed and dragging a hand down his face. He couldn’t handle hearing her say the things she’d do for him even now; he didn’t deserve any of them.

“What? I’m not sayin’ we start goin’ at each other with axes! We could do it… properly. Work out the details and plan it out and do it… medically. Couldn’t we?”

“Sure, well, as long as you’re anesthetized, cutting off extremities for the sake of experimentation is perfectly acceptable.” She held her tongue in the wake of his biting sarcasm, pulling her knees up to her chest and covering her face with the hand closest to him. Hatred for himself pooled in his gut at the sight, and he instantly regretted his harsh tone.

“Look, I dunno, ‘m just tryin’ to think of ways to make this work.” Her voice cracked. He was silent for a moment, fidgeting his legs under the duvet as his mind churned for a way to console her.

“You’re right. I’m sorry, that was insensitive.” His hand reached over to cover the one on her face, pulling gently until he revealed her eyes. Her glistening eyes paired too well with the bitter fear she sent unwittingly through their skin: that his reluctance to come up with a plan meant he was tiring of her body.

“Rose, you know I don’t think that.” He flooded her with loving sentiments so strongly and suddenly that their hands and forearms tingled with the intensity, and she gasped. No, she couldn’t believe he thought that, not really. It must have just been one of those fleeting thoughts that could creep up on a
person, when they were scared out of their mind. He too, was terrified, if he was really honest with himself.

“'S okay to admit you’re scared, Doctor.” Her voice was barely a whisper as a tear fell onto their joined hands. He clasped them properly, linking each of their fingers together and wiping the wet spot with his thumb.

“I am.” He couldn’t look her in the eyes as he confessed, solemn and hopeless.

“What about hair?” Rose sat up quickly, wiping her face with the back of her free hand.

“What?” His forehead scrunched in confusion.

“Does it have enough genetic material to suffice as a bio-receptacle, or whatever?”

“Hair… I suppose it…”

Would work. But if there was one thing he loved about this regeneration… oh no. She was going to find him out.

His hand fell out of hers, severing the line and he scooted away as fast as he could, but she was faster, grabbing his hand and rolling over to wrestle him into the sheets while he fought to shield the fringe on his forehead from her gaze with his free hand. She straddled his stomach with new sparks of excitement and hope in her eyes that scared him for his tousled locks but delighted him everywhere else.

“Will it work?” He only just caught her smile before he closed his eyes, pulling his fingers gently through the strands above his ear, because he knew that smile would make him cave.

“It probably would,” he mumbled, pouting his lip.

Rose leaned down over him and started to stroke his cheek, and his eyes peeked open as if on cue.

“Would it grow back?” she breathed, sliding her fingers up into his hair, tickling his scalp as she admired the view.

“No,” he answered immediately, testing how much sympathy he could milk from her before he agreed.

“Doctor.” Her eyes narrowed as her fingers delved deeper, massaging through the product in the way that made his head spin and his eyelids flutter closed. “D’you think I can’t tell when you’re lyin’?”

“Mmmm,” he groaned, leaning into her touch.

“'S that a yes or no?” She’d started playing with his chest, too, brushing swirling patterns on his sternum with her fingertips, and suddenly he became hyperaware of the proximity of her bare bum to his rapidly hardening length.

“All right, it’ll grow back. Slowly.”

Her euphoric smile made his stern composure crack despite himself, and he pulled her down for a slow, tender kiss, easing the roughness of the first time, apologizing for harsh words, relieving deep-seated fears.

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Of course, he was insufferable for weeks. Or, so she insisted he was. She did say something about "sulking like a child" whenever he stood in front of their bathroom mirror, running his palm over the centimeter-long strands. He supposed he might have frowned a bit too much at the sight, but he thought he was handling it fairly well, considering. He never actually blamed her directly.

It just wasn’t fair that she giggled at him even as it was happening, as tufts fell from the blade onto his shoulders and face and she laughed as she leaned back to check if she’d missed a spot. Or that she looked so impossibly beautiful with her cropped shoulder length tresses while he had to go around looking like the world’s most scrawny soldier.

She did make it up to him, though. Sometimes in their bed, or on the couch in the library, or the jump seat in the console… that one time in the Queen’s closet on Pochra V… and the jail cell on Grypi…

It wasn’t long, though, really, before the military grade cut lengthened to tufts that were workable with the product, and even less time before he was fashioning thick, messy spikes in his former style. He might have exaggerated how much slower his hair grew than humans’.

Wherever they went, they kept the little reinforced glass vials in their pocket (he made sure to get her a pair of trousers with pockets that were bigger on the inside), always silently hoping they wouldn’t need to use them whenever they stepped out the blue doors. Never knowing if it would be their last day to see each other, because, of course, that they had no guarantee it was going to work, and there was no hiding either of their anxious energy whenever they held hands.

She wasn’t ready to give him up; he feared they would both have to.

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ONE YEAR LATER

The meeting hadn’t gone well, she knew that much. Being thrown out of conference rooms, though, was nothing new to them, nor being insulted by the natives for offering to help. Not everyone accepted the Doctor’s distinctive brand of alien assistance, and they knew they had to accept their decision either way. They’d been chased by a few locals that had heard rumors even in the short time they stayed on this planet, but they weren’t expecting any violence.

They were only just leaving the outskirts of the palace, though, when something sharp buried itself in her neck, making her gasp. Her hand flew up to feel out the tiny, feathered dart lodged in her skin, and not three seconds later the Doctor hissed beside her. She turned with a grimace to find a small green dart had struck him just above the collar, one he promptly removed with a measured grip on the device and a small tug. He winced as a drop of blood oozed from the tiny wound the needle left, glancing down only briefly at it before turning to her and realizing she hadn’t removed hers.

His eyes went wide as he beckoned her forward with a hand and an incoherent plea, gingerly removing the dart and apologizing as she cringed under his hand. With a scowl and his most menacing ‘oncoming storm’ glare, he scanned the area for the antagonists, but his search must have come up blank. He cursed as he turned around and craned his neck to search the towering windows of the buildings behind them, but only huffed in frustration as that, too, turned out to be futile.

“Doctor, what’d they hit us with?” she asked hesitantly, keeping her voice as calm and quiet as she could, but already dreading the answer based on his instant anger.

“Rose…” he started as he stared at the two miniature weapons in his palm, that empty-eyed look on his face he always had when he was analyzing something he just tasted or doing a complex calculation in his head. “We’re an hour’s walk from the TARDIS, here.” It seemed he was more
talking to himself than even remotely answering her question.

“Doctor, what is it?” she repeated, sensing this was one of those times he wasn’t processing questions on the first go. He turned and finally looked at her, seeing the fear in her eyes and truly listening this time, steadying himself before he answered.

“Unrefined spectrox. A concentrated dose… the only cure is something they certainly don’t have on this planet. But the effects will be irreversible before I can get us someplace that has it.”

“What effects?” she prodded, raising her voice out of mounting fear.

“It’s a potent neurotoxin. It’ll start with a rash.” He gestured to his neck, where red irritation was already swelling around the site of injection. “Cramps, muscle spasms, paralysis, all spreading until either the lungs or the heart stops working.” She fought not to show any terror at the prospect of those symptoms, keeping her head clear and cool.

“Regeneration can overcome it?”

He winced hard as he brought a hand to his forehead, pressing it there like doing so would undo the past five minutes of events, make him able to warn his earlier self. Or like he wanted to lie, but knew he couldn’t. He finally broke his silence and looked at her, nodding halfheartedly in response.

“How long have we got?”

“For me, maybe two hours. For you…” He took her hand in his, closing his eyes as he processed the sensory information, scanning for the dosage she’d received, calculating according to species and body weight. “One.” He linked their fingers together and squeezed hard, pouring immense effort into staying positive and hopeful about this, and sending those efforts to her.

“Come on.”

Running was always something they did well together, that they could find some enjoyment in even when the circumstances weren’t ideal.

This run wasn’t fun in the slightest.

They made it back to the TARDIS in thirty minutes despite how their pace slowed when her shoulder and arm started to cramp and twitch and her neck went stiff. The Doctor didn’t show any ill effects, but she could feel the same tightness and stiffness through their linked hands, though to a far lesser degree. If he was right, half as intense.

“Rose, I need you to stay calm.” His hands were firm on her shoulders, his voice stern, and only then she realized she was hyperventilating, tears escaping from her eyes. Because even with all their planning and forethought, this moment was nothing like she anticipated it. She hadn’t prepared herself, really, mentally or emotionally, to face the actual process of regeneration. Or the reality that she might need to say goodbye to brown eyes and hair product and pinstripes right now, and she had no idea how to.

“Rose!” He shook her and her gaze found his as he overwhelmed her with calming encouragement, and she found solace in those eyes as she had for so many years, even in the years of his absence, when she could only find them in her dreams. She floated in the serenity of his borrowed thoughts, the reassurances that everything would be all right, whether or not they came out of this with new faces. That it would be over very quickly, that he would never leave her, that nothing could separate them and that was all that mattered.
“I love you,” he whispered, though the words were dull compared to the bright strength of the sentiment that flooded the synapses throughout her body. He pulled her close and kissed her like it was the last chance he’d ever have – and it reminded her of their first kiss, when he still wore leather and sacrificed himself for her.

“Love you too,” she whispered back as he ended the kiss too soon. But he was absolutely right, about everything. Of course he was. They were going to be just fine. She straightened herself and tried to ignore the spreading pain on the left side of her torso, wiping tears from her eyes and waiting for his next command.

“We need to do it now, or you won’t have enough motor control left to –” He stopped himself, seeing as she felt her face drain of color.

“Take the vial.” He dug into his own pocket and pulled his out, a light glass cylinder full of his signature shade of brown hair, and she took out her own, holding the blonde container in a shaking hand.

“Now, I wouldn’t recommend holding it, cause you’ll probably only drop it once… well, once it starts. Set it on the grating for safekeeping. I’ll do the same.”

They lay their respective vials on the floor, though on opposite sides of the console, and she blanched at the thought of being so far from him, but knew they couldn’t risk greater proximity, if the past two regenerations she’d seen were anything to go by.

“Do you feel it?” he asked, stepping closer but being careful not to touch her anymore.

“’S like… something hot, in my stomach or, no… my bones or something. ‘S like… pulling me in, or it’s tryin’ to get out, I dunno.”

“Don’t fight it. Try to listen to it, to let it get where it wants to go.”

She tried to obey the ambiguous advice, relaxing her tensed muscles and trying to surrender to the vaporizing warmth coming from within.

It was only a moment before she cried out as the tingling warmth bubbled to the surface and spread through her limbs. She held up a hand to find it glowing yellow, a dusty sort of ether coming off her skin in wisps.

“You should be able to tell when you’ve finished healing. Once you’re past that point, try to channel the rest of the energy forward, and aim for the vial as best you can. It should direct itself, though, seeing as it’s the only appropriate receptacle.”

Breathing became more difficult as her body succumbed to the energy, the shivering warmth escalating to molten heat so intense it was painful, stinging and tearing through every cell in her body. She finally understood what the Doctor meant – it felt like dying. With her last few breaths she gasped out his name and turned to him, and though he was similarly consumed with golden light now, he nodded with a weak smile.

She twisted every thought on him, on how much she loved him and wanted to stay with him, hoping by some miracle it would help. The light and the pain were close to blinding her so she committed his last smile to memory before it disappeared, focusing on the sight of his lips turned up with hope until it started to numb the agony.

“See you soon.” He grunted as he exploded with golden fire.
Epilogue II

Chapter Notes

Holy shit. This is it. The end. I'm... I don't even have words. I'll probably be crying myself to sleep tonight! They've been my babies for so long... anyway, you probably don't want to hear that. The point is, I'm back to feeling good about this fic, and I can honestly say I'm proud of how this ending turned out. I hope you guys all enjoy it and that it does them justice. God, I sure am going to miss them. To the readers, thank you for everything, for those of you who stuck with me through this year and a half long journey. All my love, to our little lovebirds, and to you.

The pain didn’t really get any worse. It was more that she was temporarily immobilized, incapable of acting on any impulse to lessen her discomfort as the healing fire consumed and re-forged her body with violent urgency. But although it didn’t worsen as the process went on, it was hardly bearable when it began, and the only thing restraining her screams in her lungs was the nearly complete paralysis. All she could do was endure: bend every stray thought away from the agony and towards the Doctor as the seconds dragged like hours.

The Doctor was right when he said she’d be able to feel the end of the healing process. In a very distinct instant she knew the poison and its effects were gone from her body, through a sixth sense she’d never be able to recall later.

It was time to stop it, but she didn’t have the faintest idea how.

She settled for simply wishing it with all her strength, willing the energy away from herself, for it not to change her.

And suddenly, though it took tremendous effort, she discovered that she could move her arms. Emulating the way the Doctor had routed the excess energy with his hands, she aimed them for the vial on the floor and waited for it to be over, one way or another.

But even when the light began to fade and the pain and paralysis eased slowly to respite, it was impossible to tell whether or not it had worked. She had no way of knowing the difference between a full, proper regeneration and this theoretical halfway version they had crafted for themselves. It might have been a one-time fluke the first time it was successful for the Doctor, something that couldn’t happen again in the same universe. Perhaps they couldn’t cheat regeneration the same way twice.

Her vision returned and she stumbled as the last wave of energy left her body, taking the last traces of pain with it.

Holding up both hands, she saw ten fingers in the same shape and tone she’d been looking at her entire life. She wiggled her hips and bent her legs to find her clothes fit exactly the same way. She tossed her hair in front of her face, immediately recognized the shade, and ran her fingers through it, checking the texture for irregularities that would shatter the familiarity. But she found none. Her heart soared for a brief moment of blissful relief before she remembered her outcome was only half the concern. She hesitated in fear before turning to the Doctor, closing her eyes and delaying the reveal.
“Rose.”

Her heart hammered in her chest and her stomach swooped to the floor at the sound of her name, because she would know that voice anywhere. The soothing tenor, the way it seemed to savor each letter in her name as it lingered on his tongue.

A familiar wide smile and bright brown eyes lit up the console when she turned, recognition in his gaze, too, and she’d never been so happy to see anybody in her life. Well, the moment was perhaps rivaled with the one that she found him on that dark, dingy street. It was a tie.

They closed the distance between them in three easy strides apiece, and he caught her easily as she leapt into his arms, spinning her a few times through their tight embrace.

“Oh my God, it’s you. It’s really you,” she sobbed tears of relief into his shoulder.

He sighed into her hair as he set her on the grating, and they finally let go of the months of nervous tension they endured waiting for this day as contentment melded them in place next to the console.

“You’re still with me.” He exhaled roughly against her neck, voice thick with emotion, never loosening his arms from around her.

“Always,” she breathed, tears soaking his jacket before she loosened her grip enough that she could reach up and capture his lips.

It was gentle, their bodies both exhausted from the skirmish with death, slow brushes of gratitude and relief that these were the same lips they already knew so intimately. It was far too soon that the Doctor eased them out of the kiss.

“Hold on, hold on,” he exclaimed as he extricated himself from her grip. She followed after him, fighting for a hold on his jacket, but he fought adamantly against her advance until she gave up, staring after him in confusion as he backed a single step away and just gazed at her. His smile was soft and warm but she didn’t return it, fearful he was about to shatter the quiet contentment of the moment with news something had gone wrong, after all, or some new sort of Time Lord angst he cooked up in the post-regenerative haze.

“Rose, you know that I basically... belong to you.” He spoke quietly, the smile disappearing and his brow furrowing as he struggled to find the right words, and then swallowed hard. He couldn’t have planned this; she’d have seen it in his head at one point or another, so she gave him the time and attention he needed. “I’ve shared things with you that no other living thing in this universe knows about me. Or any universe, really. Mind you, some of those things were by accident, but –”

“Doctor!” she scolded, anxious for him to finish his damn thought. It was exceedingly rare that he insisted on talking without any physical contact, to form his own words rather than have them unwittingly explained by subconscious emotions and half-formed thoughts. It was usually his way of demonstrating he cared about the execution of whatever thoughts were brewing, and wanted to be delicate about the phrasing. Though, he rarely succeeded.

“Kidding, I’m kidding!” A teasing grin spread across his face; whatever he had to say couldn’t be as morbid as she’d thought. Oh, the nerve of that man. “What I’m trying to say is, I’m yours in almost every way I can think of, and I was wondering, well, if you’d like to... be mine, too.”

“I am,” she blurted out instantly, thinking he was only looking for reassurance (which would have been much easier to extract from her head, anyway). His eyes lit up and his smile brightened at the confirmation with a boyish giggle, but he quickly resumed his serious demeanor so he could
elaborate.

He repeated the phrase he’d said more than a year ago, in the aftermath of their amorous reunion: something in Gallifreyan that he told her meant “no one knows me like you do.”

“When I told you what it meant, I was off the mark. I think a better translation is ‘you know me better than I know myself, better than anyone could ever hope to know me, and you love me all the same.’”

“All that in eight syllables?” she teased, because she had no clue how to describe with words the way her heart was swelling up out of her chest and filling her throat.

“Still doesn’t do the original phrase justice.” He laughed, and it was such a beautiful, untroubled sound. He was so at ease talking about this now, she marveled at how far he’d come since the day they said goodbye on a frigid beach.

“You’ve seen me at my worst, stayed with me through the most terrible things. Our minds are connected, and we’ve had several…” he cleared his throat, “very pleasurable evenings together.” She giggled at that, shocked that he could still be so loath to call lovemaking for what it was.

“But there’s one more way I can bind myself to you, if you’ll have me.”

Slowly he sank to the grating beneath them until his head was level with her chest, supporting himself on one knee as he reached inside his jacket.

“I’m sorry I don’t have a posh box to open, but…” He held up his hand, perched between his thumb and index finger was a brilliantly silver ring, a floral-shaped diamond perched in the center that shined pink when the light hit it just right. She had the energy to gasp, but after that she could hardly breathe at all.

“Rose Tyler, will you – ”

“Yes,” she wheezed, interrupting him because she couldn’t bear to make him wait two words longer. He was on his feet in an instant, one corner of his mouth pulling up.

“Marry me?” he finished, for good measure.

“Yes, of course I will. Yes, a thousand times yes.”

His lips crashed against her smile and a firm hand took her jaw, persuading her mouth to open under his as he danced her back into the console, simply so they had something to lean against as they sank into one another. Hips pushed and hands pulled as they devoured the taste, like they hadn’t kissed in years. She thought any moment she’d wake up from a dream, be asleep someplace on the TARDIS because the regeneration had gone wrong.

He silently assured her of the opposite but she still clung to lingering doubts, so she nudged his shoulder despite feeling his reluctance to part, knowing she needed to say this before they got carried away. He eased the intensity of the kiss and she pulled back, releasing him with a messy wet sound.

“Doctor, are you sure you really want this?” she panted. “I don’t want you to think it’s somethin’ I need, that I need it to stay with you for – ”

“I know it isn’t.” He frowned, like he was insulted at the notion. “But I know it’s important to you.”

“But you aren’t even from Earth, I never expected – ”
“I know you didn’t. And I’m not, but… do you think we didn’t have marriages on Gallifrey?”

“I guess they do.” She smiled after a moment, realizing what he was implying. “Does that mean you want to do it your way?” She grimaced at the way the question came out, but he seemed to understand.

“Oh, I’d love it!” he beamed before checking himself, clearing his throat as he backpedaled. “Uhm, that is, if you want. The tradition’s recognized across most of the known galaxies, this one included. Though, not for a few millennia down the line.”

“I do want.” She answered with more force than was necessary, but she couldn’t contain her elation that it was really happening. That the next intimate tradition of his home she would be acquainted with was this one, one she’d never dreamed he’d need or even want to think of the two of them as official. They were already as official as they come, to each other, anyway. But that didn’t stop her from tearing up again as she considered what the ceremony would be like.

She decided to save the questions for later, though.

“Not a bad idea,” he answered her thoughts, his voice low and gravelly, one eyebrow lifting to his forehead, and she knew exactly what that devious smirk meant.

She couldn’t stop glancing down at her left hand as they sealed the deal on the jump seat, his trousers at his ankles and her skirt bunched up at her waist. He attempted to hide the thrill it sent through him whenever she touched him with that hand, the new addition rigid and cool and sharply contrasting with her soft, warm skin. The way it made him shudder with excitement even as he tried to smother his manic grin in her shoulder (she felt it every time).

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Of course, her mum condemned their plan for an “alien” wedding and sternly insisted they do it “properly” between rounds of joyful tears. She didn’t even give them time to agree to her terms before babbling on about making her wait so long and how they better not get up to anything suspicious and how she was expecting grandchildren. The Doctor grimaced through her unavoidable cheek kisses and Rose worried the bear hug would never end.

Before her mum was through with them, though, they passed out in the foyer.

The Doctor grabbed her hand to warn her moments before, but they crumpled to the hardwood gracelessly nonetheless, abruptly too exhausted from regeneration to function upright.

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She woke what felt like weeks later in what she recognized as the guest bedroom, noisily gulping down the glass of water on the nightstand to soothe her parched tongue before even turning to the Doctor. She grinned when she found him already awake and propped on his elbow, waiting.

“How long’ve you been up?” she whispered.

“Ohhhh,” he wrinkled his nose as he dug into his head to read whatever internal clock he had in there. “About four hours.”

“An’ you’ve just been lying here all this time?” She giggled.

“Well,” he mused, drawing out the ‘e’, still proving to her he hadn’t changed at all. “I checked up on you a bit. You’re doing fine, before you ask. Just needed to recover, same as me. Though I was a bit
faster. You know, Time Lord.” He gestured haughtily to himself but she only chuckled again. “And I like watching you sleep, it’s…” He trailed off, knowing he’d already said too much.

She pecked him on the lips, wordlessly thanking him for watching over her in the brief moment of contact.

“Doctor, I’ve got to ask, how’d you keep this a secret from me?”

“Keep what a secret?” he asked innocently.

“What d’you think?” she teased, shoving his shoulder hard enough to knock him off balance for a few seconds. “Gettin’ married. You know, proposin’ and everything.”

“The truth is I didn’t, really. I didn’t think of it until we were back in the TARDIS and it was all about to happen.”

“Seriously? You expect me t’believe it was spur of the moment?”

“Well, how could I have hidden it from you, otherwise?” He had a point, there. “We were both trying so hard to think of a way to deal with this. All I wanted was to prove to you I’d still want to be with you, no matter what you came out looking like. I mean I certainly hoped that…” he trailed off again, shaking his head as he realized it was a train of thought he didn’t want to catch.

“But that’s not the point. I couldn’t think of anything in all that time, at least, not until that moment. I think the TARDIS may have planted the seed, but… I knew she was right. It was the perfect way to show you. I thought, even if I turned out short and ginger and not very foxy, I thought it’d help show you I still love you.

“She got the ring from someplace in storage and got it to me before you had finished changing. I didn’t even know if it had worked yet, I just knew that no matter what, I wanted to at least ask you.”

“Are we always gonna need the TARDIS to mediate in our relationship?” She made sure their hands were clasped now, so he knew she was teasing him.

“Hmm…” His lips twitched as he fought back his smile. “Probably, yes.” He nodded.

“You’re a bit thick.”

“Probably, yes.” He nodded with more enthusiasm.

She snogged him hard after that. The pulling hair, clashing teeth sort of snog, something both of them had (not-so) secretly missed for months now – it was rare to get the sense of desperation they once had now that they were truly and properly stuck with each other.

“Haauuhhh,” he slurred when she pulled away too soon, staring after her mouth in a dazed disappointment. But there were too many thoughts buzzing through her head to finish this the way she wanted to.

“’S gonna take months for mum to plan the wedding.” One of her hands was already on his shirt, reflex or instinct or something even deeper making her fidget with the top button before she even realized it.

“Mnhmm.” He blinked and swallowed hard, trying to clear the fog she left him in. “What’s your point, exactly?” His eyes remained transfixed where her fingers had already released the first three buttons of his shirt. She caught herself, pressing her palm into the fabric and splaying her fingers.
“I don’t want to wait that long.”

“Ahem, well.” His hand covered over hers, holding it against his chest. “We don’t have to. We can skip the whole thing, hop in the TARDIS and come back whatever day your mum plans.”

“You know my mum won’t let us. I’m gonna need to be there for the dress, and dad’s gonna want to have a talk with you. Several talks, more like. And there’s the venue and the food and everythin’, it’s a whole mess they’re gonna make us help with.”

“Hmm. No, that doesn’t sound fun at all.” His eyebrows pulled together as his thumb kneaded into her hand, indiscernible thoughts flashing through his head too fast for her to process them.

“What if I said we could do it right now?”

She gasped as she sat up, hauling him up with her.

“Your way?” she breathed.

“Yep,” he chirped. “It may not be recognized by your mum, but it’d be recognized by me, and most of the known galaxies, if that means anything.”

“Are you serious?” she practically squeaked.

“’Course I am. If it’ll make the wait any easier, we can do this one first.”

“It will, it will, it will!” She’d pounced on him, pinning him to the bed and climbing on top of him. “How do we do it?”

“Well, first things first,” he grunted out, shifting under her weight, “you’ll have to release me.”

“Right, okay.” She tumbled off him and somehow landed on her feet on the floor, bouncing on her toes until he joined her and calmed her steps with his hands on her shoulders.

“You sure you’re ready for this, Rose? No turning back once this is done. I won’t let you.” A hard edge entered his voice on the last phrase, and a chill trickled down her spine. She knew that possessive shadow of himself always lurked beneath the surface, and when they first met it used to frighten her to the bone when he unearthed it, when the looming dark figure rose up and overpowered his light.

It still emerged now and then, after a brush with death, or when she didn’t listen to him on something he had deemed was crucial. It happened less and less, though, over the years, especially once he’d changed out of leather and cropped hair. Usually, he was joking, trying to get a rise out of her when he talked like this now.

But she knew this wasn’t a joke, not this time. She’d known since the first time they had sex: he only knew how to mate for life. For lives, rather.

His eyes were soft, though, even as he fought to keep his mouth in a hard line. Try as he may, he could never completely hide his vulnerability around her. Despite how indestructible and powerful he tried to act, the warm and squishy human side of him mushroomed up and eclipsed the god-complex in her presence. Without her, she knew, he grappled interminably with the dark, vengeful, and even violent tendencies that came with loneliness and trauma. She’d never betray his confidence to anyone, but he sometimes wished to renounce his biology altogether and become human himself, in moments they were deeply intertwined.
She’d seen inside his head, could see the piece of himself that he’d willingly surrendered to her, the
gaping hole it’d left behind in their time apart. It wasn’t his physical strength that wouldn’t let her
leave him now, though it’d be easy as caging a domestic bunny to hold her hostage. It was his hearts
that would never be able to let her go, not in ten thousand years.

They both knew his words wouldn’t be perceived as a real threat. If anything, it only exposed him,
reminded her for the thousandth time just how afraid he was of losing her again.

“What, an’ you think I’d let you?” She matched his grave tone though in a higher octave, grabbing
the lapels of his shirt in her fists, leaving wrinkles he’d have to iron out. Showing as much as telling
they were equals in this.

He chuckled, a deep and sinister sound, as he pried her hands from his shirt, before softening the
gesture with a press of his lips to hers, calming the intense moment before it could escalate just yet.

“Do we have privacy?” he asked quietly, as though a member of her family would suddenly hear
him.

“Looks dark out,” she observed, nodding to the window. “What time is it?”

“Around 6, local time.”

She cursed under her breath in shock, realizing she’d been out for nearly seventeen hours.

“Dad’s probably already up, then, or will be soon. But he wouldn’t come knockin’. Mum won’t be
up for hours yet, ‘s my guess. Tony, either.”

“Good. Fantastic. Brilliant.” He went on with a few other superlative exclamations as he turned his
focus away from her and began to wander around the room, searching the floor and the ceiling
without discretion.

“Looking for something?” she asked, following not far behind, confused.

He stopped and placed a hand over the open buttons on his shirt before smoothing it down, fingers
wrapped around nothing but air.

“Was I not wearing a tie yesterday?”

“No.” She giggled.

“Right,” he agreed a bit sheepishly. “Well I need a tie. Well, I need three ties. We’ll need three ties.
Or any long pieces of cloth, really, but I figured that’d be the easiest thing.” He was rambling, and
that meant that maybe, possibly, he was actually starting to get nervous about this.

“All right,” she agreed, keeping her voice calm. “Probably shouldn’t ask dad for those, he’ll jump to
the wrong conclusions” (the Doctor’s eyebrows shot up high on his forehead). “Maybe there’s some
in this closet. They get all sorts of guests stayin’ here now, high profile, y’know.”

There were several, in fact.

The Doctor helped her pick out the longest ones – one crimson, one black, and one violet, and she
was still burning with curiosity what exactly he planned to do with each of them (and more than a
little aroused at the thought).

“Large weddings were frowned upon. So really, the fact that we don’t have an audience isn’t too out
of place,” he explained as he led them to the center of the room before turning to face her. “But I’m going to have to modify a few things. Only a Time Lord can officiate a ceremony that involves a Time Lord, but seeing as there’s only one of those left, I’m happy to volunteer. I’ve officiated a few, myself, over the centuries, in addition to being on the other end, so I know what to do.”

“I trust you,” she whispered, already sensing such an intense intimacy from his explanation that she felt the need to quiet herself. She didn’t want to dwell on that “no one else to officiate” comment, knowing that would have him spiraling fast, and it was true – she did trust that he knew what to do.

“This is very important to me.” He placed both hands on her left, running a finger over the circular reminder of their recent engagement, making his point clear. “But would it be all right if I took it off for a bit?”

“How come?” She couldn’t stop the question before it was out in the open.

“Rings aren’t part of our tradition. It’s forbidden to wear jewelry, metal, or any adornments aside from formal clothing. The ceremony is supposed to represent a union of the flesh and the mind, not anything material. Couples don’t wear rings to symbolize marriage, anywhere on Gallifrey.”

It was so vastly different from the Earth tradition, the only one she knew and that’d been engrained into her psyche since before grade school, that she couldn’t speak as she tried to absorb and accept the notion.

“We will, though, Rose. I think it’s a brilliant tradition, and I’d like to stick to it. And we’ll need rings, besides, for the second wedding, whenever it is. But to do this one right, you can’t be wearing it.”

“Right, okay, yeah.” She nodded vigorously, realizing it’d been a while since she spoke at all.

“We’ll put it right back on, after,” he promised, tilting her chin up with one hand because she’d still been staring down at the ring and his hands in hers. His gaze penetrated hers as his sincerity radiated through her body, as well as some other previously hidden thoughts (like that he was nearly going mad with excitement to have one of his own) until her knees were weak.

Too much, she thought.

“Sorry,” he rushed out, easing back immediately. Even as good as she’d become at interacting with him this way (whether intimately or casually), his mind was inherently much stronger than hers, and he could still overwhelm her with the depth of his emotions if he wasn’t careful in heated moments.

“No, it’s good, ‘s fine. I want to do this. You can take it off.” She reassured him with her mind, too, that she was anxious and the territory was unfamiliar to her but she trusted him with everything.

He divested her of the token of his affection and turned to set it on the blanket.

“Everything I say is going to be in High Gallifreyan,” he continued without lingering in the forlorn moment. “But I’m going to translate it all as I go. And I don’t want you to let go of me through the entire thing.” He let two of the ties slip to the ground, leaving the black one in both hands as he went on.

“The officiating person is supposed to be the one speaking, so I’ll keep it in second person, so you’ll know the difference between me and, well, Officiator Me.” He paused to take her cheek in one hand, closing his fist around the tie with the other. “You ready?”

“Yes.” She nodded, but her stomach in knots that this moment was already here – what was she
thinking, asking to do something so monumental in such a rush? Her mind raced back at the start, when he could barely work up the courage to kiss her, let alone all this. God, how far they’d come.

His mind was already too focused to capture her wandering thoughts, recalling unfamiliar phrases and cadences as he bent down with the black tie. She meant to kneel with him but he stayed her, taking her hand and placing it on his neck for a point of contact, a clear signal to remain standing. Supporting himself on one knee and one foot, he slid the foot forward until it was snuggled against hers, his toes aligned with her heel, the inside of his trousers brushing the outside of her bare calf.

They were both barefoot, the shoes and (in his case) socks they arrived in placed neatly at the foot of the bed. She realized it was for the better when he started to wrap the tie around their ankles, clockwise around hers and counterclockwise around his in a figure-eight.

Words she immediately recognized as his native tongue poured from his lips, faster than he’d ever spoken them to her intentionally, the sovereignty and grace in every syllable that she had come to expect. And as he promised, a soft but clear English translation flowed from his mind to hers.

On your feet you have walked alone, journeyed in solitude, fled from dangers and rushed to welcome friends; until your paths crossed and they carried you to this moment, to this ceremony for which we are gathered.

Now your feet are bound, he finished a loose knot to hold the tie in place as he spoke, so that from this day forth you shall move together. When one stands, the other must also rise. Where one runs, the other must follow.

He picked up the other two ties before standing again, laying the purple one over his arm while taking the red one (the longest one), and looping it around her neck, ensuring it was beneath her bed-mussed hair and against her skin, in the brief quiet moment that followed. He slowly leaned forward and crouched until their foreheads touched, and he pushed forward with delicate pressure until her hand dropped from his neck, realizing she wouldn’t need it right now. His eyes were still open, so she fought the instinct to close hers, despite every experience that taught her to when anyone’s face was so close.

He continued, the foreign, magnificent language thick in the air and English resonating in her mind like a weak echo, as he looped the tie around his own neck.

In your minds you have been isolated, alone with all memories joyful or traumatic, all knowledge helpful or harmful, all sentiments loving or spiteful, save for those that you choose to share with others.

Now your minds are bound, he crossed the ends of the tie twice, not enough spare fabric for a proper knot, so that from this day forth your mental wavelengths shall be unified. This permanent connection shall magnify the pleasures of love, and lessen the burden of grief as it is divided between you.

With a gentle touch he took her left hand and clasped it firmly in his.

This is supposed to be around both our hands, he explained, and she started at the sudden mental address without the preceding Gallifreyan words of warning. But I can’t very well tie it around both my hands without another pair of hands, so this will have to do. He allowed himself only a tiny chuckle, whether at his own joke or her tiny jump she couldn’t tell, as he slowly wrapped the last, purple tie around their wrists, forming the same figure eight in the design as he did with the one around their ankles.
Your hands have always performed only as you bid them to. They can create chaos or restore order, bring life or obliterate it, build strength or lie in weakness, as only your will commands it. And yet in through all these acts they have craved their own companionship, for the spaces between their fingers to be filled with those of another.

Now your hands are bound, she helped him tie the final loose knot before he could struggle any more with his single hand, so that from this day forth you shall act as one. When one fights, the other must also. When one stumbles, the other will hold them upright.

This portion of the proceedings seemed to be at an end, because the Doctor smiled from ear to ear on the last word.

“It’s customary in inter-species ceremonies for the vows to be spoken in the native language of your betrothed.” He played with the last word in his mouth, at this point very much enjoying using fancy-sounding words now that he was in a groove of ancient royal speech.

“Ohay.” She nodded with a bright smile.

“I’ll go first.”

“I,” he spoke his name, his first, proper name, just as she’d seared it into her memory the only time he said it aloud. “…bind my body and mind to this woman, Rose Tyler. Through illness, sorrow, and poverty we shall persevere; only death itself has power to part us. Though a day may come when I can no longer look upon this face.” The Doctor’s free hand came up to brush his knuckles against her cheek as tears spilled over her eyes. “Even then I will protect and treasure her. From this day, until the end of my days, I will love her more than myself.” Their link resonated with the authenticity and finality of his words as he finished.

“Fancy learning some Gallifreyan?” His tone became light.

She sniffled, trying to keep her tears at bay, as the Doctor spoke her answering lines for her, repeating the ones she had trouble with until she said them correctly. Though it took her a bit longer and she stumbled more than she ever hoped to, she spoke with confidence rather than embarrassment. She was saying the exact same words to him, though in a different translation, and he made no attempts to hide his soaring joy from her as she finished the last sentence.

He spoke again, a long string of commanding phrases she couldn’t understand, and then his face softened.

“With all the stars and celestial bodies in the cosmos as witness, we are now legally, physically, and mentally bound.”

As soon as the Doctor’s lips touched hers, she knew it was finished.

“Doctor, that was…” she breathed after a few moments of tender kisses, “… so beautiful.”

He hummed sweetly as he reunited their lips.

“My Rose.”

It started soft and slow, awe and gratitude simmering between them as they both tried to comprehend what they’d just done. It became hard and passionate, though, as they tugged on the silk ties wrapped around their limbs and found them unbreakable without untying them. More of that earlier possessiveness of each other overtook them because she was so proud, so incredibly proud to be his, and he so unbelievably honored to be hers.
They fell back into that roughness they snogged with before, hopping across the carpet and tumbling onto the bed while they struggled to loosen all their symbolic ties. When all three were finally on the floor, they’d never gotten their clothes off so fast. When he squealed in pain they both quickly realized they’d forgotten about the ring; he wriggled it from under his back and had it returned to its proper place in no time.

“Looking ravishing this morning, Mrs. Doctor,” he teased as she climbed on top of him, his gaze roaming across her newly exposed chest.

“Handsome as ever, Mr. Tyler.”

He flashed her a toothy grin even through a low moan as she finally joined their bodies.

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He thought using the word ‘hate’ would be disrespectful, given the circumstances. But he *strongly disliked* this suit. The shirt was too starchy and it was itching between his shoulder blades and at the cuffs. Jackie had done this ‘double Windsor’ nonsense with the silk tie and it felt too tight and too bunched up at his neck. The trousers and jacket ‘properly fit him’ as Pete insisted, hanging loose around his waist and chest compared to the suits he normally wore. They were almost *too* black; he wandered around absorbing all the light from any room he was in like a black hole. Reminded him of a fabric from a much later century that he never much liked.

He also *strongly disliked* the way no one would let him touch the food for the reception, or let him in the kitchen. How was he to get through the day without a bite to eat, seeing as he wasn’t allowed any trips to the TARDIS?

He *strongly disliked* how everyone was ordering him about, telling him what to wear and where to stand and when to do what the whole bloody day.

At least they let him do his own hair. He wasn’t sure he’d be able to tolerate anyone-besides-Rose’s hands in it, styling it some absurd way or *heavens forbid* trying to tame it against gravity, without physically lashing out. He spent even more time on it than usual, separating big clumps and getting the angle of the spikes just right so it was flawless for the photos he knew to expect (and perfectly touchable for Rose’s enjoyment later that evening).

But more than anything, he so, so *strongly disliked* not being with Rose. Not being able to see her, even.

The first thing he tried, of course, was their telepathic transmitter, but she hadn’t worn it since they’d been here and he knew it was stupid of him to think she’d be wearing it now. This bad-luck-to-see-the-bride-before-the-wedding thing was one bloody stupid Earth superstition.

To be fair, though, he realized, they’d never been apart this long since she came back to this universe.

*Quite right, too,* he reflected.

He couldn’t see Donna, either; she’d been at the bachelorette party with Rose through the night and helping her get ready since early this morning. Mickey and Martha were mostly helping either Rose or one of her parents, though he did get a few sporadic minutes to catch up with them. Tony was mostly running about trying to teach every adult in the vicinity something about each of his action figures, though he did enjoy the few moments when *he* was the adult getting his attention. Jack tried several times to make small talk that he grudgingly indulged until the proud eternal bachelor
inevitably got distracted by the nearest potential shag.

He only hoped it would all be worth it when he finally saw Rose that evening.

He was squirming a bit, being the center of attention of the entire audience in the garden, he had to admit. He swore every person out there was staring at him, like they were waiting for him to sprout a third eye or for his skin to turn green, revealing him as the extraterrestrial he was. His hands fidgeted with his collar between trips to his dreadfully normal-sized pockets and he rolled his shoulders and wriggled his feet in the big, wide, obviously-not-Chuck-Taylor dress shoes until Mickey (her best man, of course) thumped him in the arm with the back of his hand.

A pianist’s rendition of the traditional theme sounded through the extensive speaker system when she finally appeared through the glass doorway leading back inside the mansion, her arm in her father’s.

All the air evacuated his lungs as she made her way down the six short steps to the purple carpet, and if he had a spare thought it would have been spent in gratitude for his respiratory bypass.

The dress itself was off-white, though he didn’t try to match a name to the precise hue, but it glowed more brilliantly than the moon above, drawing the attention of every sentient creature in a half-mile radius. Strapless, fitted from her breasts down to her hips until it flowed in countless layers of soft, pillowing fabric down to her feet, light enough that the outermost layer caught in the breeze each step created. The front, although layered, shrouded her body smoothly with no blemishes, but tiers of curtain-like patterns decorated the sides and trailed from the back, like tiny invisible winged creatures held the dress at mathematic intervals.

Her hair was elegant, pulled back into a complicated weave of smooth blonde tresses behind her head, save for the few loose curls framing her face.

She’d been looking down, watching her step. But lifting her head high and squaring her shoulders, her eyes found his amidst the crowd even from the distance in record time. (Though he reckoned he was the easiest one to spot, being center-stage and taller than most and with some really great hair.)

By all that was precious in this universe, the smile she had reserved for him was the most gorgeous thing he’d seen in eleven lifetimes. Her full lips were stained lightly red, colorful shadows around her eyes making them more luminous than ever, radiating joy and love that filled his chest with syrupy warmth. It was all he could do to smile back, hoping it’d bring her a fraction of the satisfaction that hers was giving him.

His calves twitched with the urge to run to her. Did they have to walk down the aisle this slowly???

She was certainly the center of attention now, and no one made any efforts to hide it: every member of the audience was turned in their chair, their bodies and heads angled to get the best glimpse of her.

Heat burned behind his cheeks at the number of male members of the audience sharing his view (especially the Captain), and again he flared with longing to take her in his arms and run and hide her from everyone else. She was already his in every way; they didn’t need this ceremony to validate that. Only his. And that dangerous, selfish part of him prickled beneath his skin, impatient to have her at his side.

He stamped it down as best as he could and focused his gaze on her, tuning out the frequencies of every other human and distraction in the periphery and only recognizing her existence. If he were human, he might have fainted from the anticipation alone: she was so breathtakingly beautiful and still smiling at him and so excited to see him, he thought even maybe as excited as he was to see her.

An eternity passed that they waltzed through the lighted arches ornate with vines, but finally she was there, her hand in his.
They both gasped at the intensity of the contact, like they’d been shocked but the electricity was very, very pleasant. Reunited after an entire twenty-four hours spent apart, their link overflowed with wisps and bubbles of nerves and excitement and affection.

The officiator peered at them oddly through his spectacles as their hands remained firmly clasped, but said nothing.

Neither of them paid attention to what he was saying, too distracted with glancing over at one another and mentally giggling with excitement (being sure to only smile on the outside). Commenting on little nuances of their wardrobes. He noticed she had a rose tied up with her hair behind her head, and she informed him it was the same shade of pink as his pocket square and he was teeming with pride that even this tiny bit of their outfits matched. She quite graphically promised him one of his favorite things, as soon as they were alone again, and his eyes went wide as he hurried to scold her silently, fighting to keep all his blood from rushing south.

They made it through the old bloke’s droning, though, and to the exciting part in hardly any time at all.

He placed the newly adorned ring on Rose’s hand, and she placed one of his own he’d picked out from the depths of the TARDIS, and he was bristling with excitement that he’d always have this physical reminder that he was hers. It was like he said; they didn’t have these on Gallifrey, but it was something he thought the humans got right.

He was never really one for public displays of affection. But the obligatory kiss that followed the last sentence of the ceremony was one he’d been quite excited for: it would show Rose that he’d never be afraid or ashamed to call her his. Their mouths only barely touched (they were smiling too widely to really have a proper snog), but he thought it better the moment stay chaste and respectful, knowing Jackie was nearby. No, he never much liked public displays of affection, until now. Now, he wanted to race across the galaxies and kiss her on every planet in existence, to never hide the fact that he loved her from anyone ever again. He thought this assembly of friends was a good start, though, and an important one.

They made the rounds through the colorful, decorated garden, chatting with each group of their friends in sequence, his arm basically a permanent addition to her waist, her arms indefinitely attached to his side. They slow-danced to each of their favorite songs, glad for the excuse to hold each other closer and steal a few kisses on the floor. They drank the finest wine and champagne of the century, their link simmering hotter and hotter with each glass as latent desires intended strictly for later in the evening surfaced with the alcohol.

They were saved when Jack and Jackie (now there’s a sentence he never thought he’d say) started to shoo them off, claiming they had a honeymoon to get to (more than likely implying two very different things).

They made the goodbyes quick. Well, except for Donna, who hugged him for longer than he thought was humanly possible. And Wilfred, who held both of their hands together while he went on for several minutes about marriage and love and aliens without really finding a way to tie them all together. And Jackie, who cried into Rose’s bare shoulder for several minutes while Rose scrunched her face in helplessness as he looked on. He promised Donna a trip as soon as they came back from their “secret” destination (as far as Rose was concerned), and Rose promised her mother they’d be back the next week her time, to ease the transition he failed to see the significance of.

As soon as the doors closed behind them, he had her in his arms, spinning her and the dress in too many circles until they were both dizzy.
They wordlessly agreed to snog until her head wasn’t swimming anymore.

“We did it.” Rose giggled as they broke apart for air. “Your way and mine.”

“Recognized by everyone, including your mother.” He flaunted his ring-bearing hand between them, wiggling his fingers with a wide grin and suddenly realizing his cheeks were starting to hurt from all the smiling.

“So where to for the honeymoon, husband of mine?” She twirled around to walk around the console, skimming a hand along the edge and helping the dress billow out to the side with one hand.

“Well,” he started, making his way around the other side to meet her as he started to engage the right knobs and levers. “I do still owe you a trip to Greece.” He stopped when he reached her, throwing the final lever and shoving his hands in his pockets. “I know an era before indoor plumbing doesn’t sound like the best atmosphere for a honeymoon, but we can spend our nights in the TARDIS. Promise. What do you think?”

“That sounds great,” she beamed, reaching up on her toes for a quick kiss. “But… are we goin’ there right now? I was gonna ask —”

“Oh, no. On the first night that we’re twice-husband and twice-wife? I’m just sending the TARDIS into the vortex. We’re going to our room,” he growled. He pounced fast, sweeping her off her feet and into his arms in the most cliché fashion, arms under her knees and her back, cradling her against his chest. They both laughed the short walk through the hallway, and she audibly thanked the TARDIS for the assistance (still buzzed from the champagne), and laughed harder still as he carried her through their doorway and they both realized that they’d really gone through with that particular tradition.

He unwrapped her carefully, preserving the fabric of her dress, lips worshiping every inch of her skin as it was revealed. He made love to her slowly, his movements tender and hands gentle as he subconsciously repeated the vows of the first ceremony just above a whisper.

Their timeline burst with galaxies behind their eyes as they found completion together, endless strings of possible endeavors and misadventures sprawled out before them. People, places, aliens, fluffy and terrifying creatures coming and going, flashing before their eyes, some unfamiliar and others the ones they loved dearly. But through the hazy torrent of fluxing possibilities one thing remained clear, remained unmoving amidst the swirling clouds of juxtaposed settings and faces.

His hand clasped in hers as they faced it all together.

It took them weeks to come down from the high of that prescient vision. The security and reassurance they took from it allowed them to glide effortlessly through two weeks of togas and philosophy.

It wouldn’t always be so easy, of course. They would fight about whether he had the authority to save people or not, and she’d tell him he didn’t have the right to play God. Some days she would remember the things she sacrificed to be with him, and she wouldn’t want to confess she’d considered them but she wouldn’t have a choice. People they loved would die, and they would suffer those losses in tandem, toeing the line between support and codependency as they spent hours at a time lost in a doubly grieving connection. He would close himself off, when guilt caught up with him and he was too ashamed to touch her, when his thoughts darkened with storm clouds on the horizon and he wanted to protect her from himself. He’d hide away from her but she’d always find him, and they’d argue themselves hoarse until he surrendered to her embrace.
But for once in his life, he regarded the future with nothing but hope, because for every misfortune they went through, there’d be a hundred fortunes. No matter how harsh their words may get where people’s lives were in danger, they would never truly abandon one another. He kept himself up some nights, not dwelling on his insecurities or having nightmares or worrying about domestics, but gazing into the future and still wondering how in all the universes he was so lucky to have met a woman as strong and devoted and caring and beautiful as Rose Tyler. And how much luckier still that he could call her his, and that she wanted him to be hers, always.

They were already prepared with secondary containers of DNA (still in the form of hair clippings), should another gloomy day come that they had to sacrifice themselves for the good of the universe. But even then, nothing was going to change between them. Though the geography would vary, and though different crowds of friends and enemies would surround them, their togetherness had become a fixed point in time and space.

The Doctor and Rose, inseparable forever.

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