On Darlig Ulv Stranden, Rose Tyler promises herself that she will have a fantastic life, and she desperately hopes that her leather-clad Doctor will do the same. Meanwhile, in the original universe, the Doctor finds a redhead in a wedding dress in his TARDIS. And even though their chances of a reunion are slim, the universe can't keep them apart forever.

A Nine/Rose fic in which Nine never regenerated, but Doomsday happened anyway, with Donna and Jack along for the ride.
Prologue

Chapter Notes

I started posting this fic to Teaspoon and ff.net in 2011. It’s finally nearing its end, so the time has come to post it here as well.


One last flash of vivid blue against black, one endless look into a face dominated by hazelnut-brown eyes that conveyed more fear than they had in front of the entire Dalek fleet, then she was gone. The gaping wound in the fabric of time and space closed, the pull died down. All that remained was a white wall and ringing silence.

The Doctor slowly loosened his grip on the magna-clamp, almost having to force his fingers open. Without even knowing that he had moved he found himself standing in front of the wall, staring at the concrete as if he could bring the barrier between universes down with sheer force of will. Eventually he raised his hand and touched the wall tentatively, as if feeling the solid concrete under his fingers would finally make real what he didn’t want to believe. She was gone.

The leather of his jacket scraped over the concrete when he leant against the wall, his forehead resting against the smooth surface. He could almost imagine that he could feel her warmth, as if the Void was nothing more than a veil he could pull aside. Almost.

He lost track of how long he stood there. It didn’t matter. Nothing mattered. Except that she was gone.

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After some time he became aware of his surroundings again. He straightened, closed his eyes for a brief second, touched the wall for the last time and left the lever room without looking back. There were two things left to do, and then he could go and let trouble find him. He felt empty. It had been her smiles, her hand in his, that had let him finally realise that the universe was still beautiful and that it was worth the fight. But without her everything looked as if it was covered in ashes, the air so thick he could hardly breathe.

The Doctor reached the basement without encountering anybody. The building seemed to be completely empty, which was just as well. No need to wait until it was dark or to warn anyone before he carried out what he should have done hours before. At least Torchwood wouldn’t have the chance to destroy even more lives beyond those the Cybermen had already taken.

He was following the corridor that led to the storage room where Yvonne Hartman had stored the TARDIS when he heard a male voice and the sound of rubber wheels on linoleum. He slipped into a room and closed the door behind him. Not that he really worried about what might happen to him, not anymore, but there were certainly deaths that were more worthwhile than ending up as a guinea pig for Torchwood’s scientists. Besides, blowing up Torchwood Tower would probably a bit of a problem if he was imprisoned. And she deserved at least a proper goodbye. Hell, she deserved the entire universe, and he would have given it to her if he’d had the chance.
“Shhh, love, don’t worry. We’ll find a way. I promise,” the person on the other side of the door said in a Welsh accent, the words barely louder than a whisper. The rest of his words were lost in the sound of the wheels of a gurney on the floor.

Thirty seconds later the Doctor left the room and continued his way to the storage area. He was mentally cataloguing his supply in explosives and the weak points in the structural integrity of the building, when he suddenly stopped dead in his tracks.

*We’ll find a way. I promise.*

She had used almost the same words, almost eighteen months ago in a dark alley in Carthage.

*We will be separated once. But we will see each other again. We will find a way. I promise.*

She had known. He clung to the words as if they were a lifeline. She had sounded so secure, so convinced.

*I promise.*

He would see her again. He didn’t even think about doubting her. If there was one person in the entire universe he believed in, it was her. Any version of her. A tiny spark of hope ignited in his hearts. He didn’t know when, he didn’t know how long it would take them, but they would see each other again. The universe owed them that much.

**A windy beach in Norway.**

A group of people gathered next to a battered jeep, something nobody would have considered an appropriate car for its owner, billionaire Pete Tyler. A young blonde woman emerged from the group and brought some distance between herself and her family. She waited silently, her wind-swept hair the only indicator that she wasn’t a statue. She closed her eyes, paused for a few seconds and opened them again.

A ghost-like figure in a black leather jacket and with piercing blue eyes had appeared in front of her. The expression on his face confirmed what she had been suspecting since he had first called her in her dreams.

“Rose.”

“Doctor,” she said, a forced smile on her face. “This isn’t fair. Whenever we have to say goodbye, you’re just a hologram. For a Time Lord, you’ve got really awful timing.”

“Yes, that’s me. No timing at all.” Rose would have believed manic smile on his face had it not been for the desperate look in his eyes.

“Where are you?”

“In the TARDIS. Orbiting a pulsar. The radiation enables the TARDIS to send this projection across the void. But we’ve only got a few minutes. This is the last hole between the universes and it’ll close soon.”

“Is there... Can you...”

“I don’t know,” he answered her unspoken question, his eyes never leaving hers.
“Would you?”

“Yes.” One syllable, just three letters, spoken matter-of-factly in a harsh Northern accent, but somehow more convincing and reassuring than any copious declaration would have been.

For a few seconds they were silent. So many unsaid things lingered between them.

“Doctor,” Rose took a deep breath, begging every deity in the universe that might be listening for courage. She wouldn’t break down now. “I love you.” Her eyes shone with tears, but her voice was strong. She took another breath and tried to keep her voice from wavering. There was something else she had to tell him, for his sake. Without someone to care for, someone to keep him going, he would only sink back into the desperation that had been his constant companion when she had first met him. So she pressed, “Promise me that you’ll find someone to travel with. Promise me.”

“Oh, Rose.” She hadn’t heard this voice since Van Statten’s bunker, and even then he hadn’t sounded so devastated. “I love you.” He had said it, Rose realised with a shock. “You are my life and my soul. You saved my life in more ways than you can imagine. This is not goodbye. We’re gonna see each other again. Will you bond with me?”

“But...”

“We’re gonna see each other again,” he repeated, still sounding as if he was trying to convince her as much as himself. “I know it. Y... someone told me, eighteen months ago. I love you. So will you bond with me?”

Rose wiped her eyes and a smile began to blossom on her face. “I...”

The hologram vanished.

“...will,” she whispered, only heard by the wind and the waves. She broke to her knees and touched the sand where his image had been. No imprints confirmed that he had really been here, that he had really said he loved her, that he had really asked her to bond with him. Nothing was left that indicated that this wasn’t a dream. But it was true. “I will.” She desperately hoped he had seen her smile and recognised it for what it meant: unconditional love and a “Yes”.

She knelt on the beach for a few more minutes until she reached a decision. This time she was going to do what he wanted her to do: have a fantastic life. Until they met again.

She gathered her courage, got up and went to face her family.
Chapter One

The Doctor blinked and found himself back in the TARDIS. Rose hadn’t been able to finish her sentence, but her bright smile had told him everything he needed to know. He had to get her back, although preferably without destroying two universes in the process. He was bound to receive at least a slap if she found out that he had taken any risks with that. And somehow he was convinced that being slapped by Rose was at least as bad as being slapped by her mum.

He turned to the console and stared at the monitor. The crack he had used to send his projection was gone. It had left a scar that emitted a very rare kind of radiation, but the remnants of the gap were far too unstable to be of use in the future.

He sighed, shut down the projector and was about to send the TARDIS back into the Vortex when he heard a demanding voice say, “Who are you? Where am I?”

He turned around to see a bride in full glory standing in the console room. “Oh, you’ve got to be kiddin’ me!”

“What is this place?” the ginger-haired woman asked, ignoring his comment, sounding even more annoyed than before.

“The TARDIS.”

“The what?”

“TARDIS. Time and Relative Dimensions in Space. And that’s exactly where we are now. So you really shouldn’t be here.” He pointed the sonic screwdriver at her and glanced at the reading, quirking an eyebrow. “Definitely human.”

“What else? And it’s rude to point that – that – whatever it is – at people!” Then the meaning of his earlier words seemed to sink in. “What do you mean – space?”

“Space. As in ‘outer space’.” The woman still looked unconvinced. “Star Trek?” he tried.

“I don’t believe you. That’s a trick.” She eyed him askance. “Must be Nerys. Nerys paid you, didn’t she?”

“Who’s Nerys?” She opened her mouth and he quickly continued, “No, I really don’t wanna know. But believe me, we’re in space.” He walked over to the doors and opened them to reveal the pulsar in the background, then he closed them again. “See? Space.”

The woman gasped. The Doctor ignored her and went over to the console. Maybe the instruments could pick up something unusual about her.

“This is impossible,” he muttered to himself. “You can’t be here.” For a second he suspected he’d gone insane, well, more insane than normal, but he quickly dismissed the thought. He started the scan, turned around and faced her. Nothing wrong with asking. “What’s your name?”

“Donna Noble.”

“Nice to meet you, Donna. I’m the Doctor.”

“The Doctor?”
“That’s me.” He waved.

“That’s not even a name!” she protested.

“Well, it’s my name,” he retorted indignantly. Humans. Typical. If something didn’t fit into the neat little boxes they used to categorise everything, they either ignored it or complained endlessly about it. Before she could interrupt him again he continued, his voice strained, “And what were you doing before you ended up here?”

“What do you think I was doing? I’m wearing a wedding gown just for fun! I was going to be married!” She had increased the volume with each sentence. In that she reminded him strongly of Jackie Tyler. “I was already halfway down the aisle when you abducted me. And now take me back!”

The Doctor raised his eyes to the ceiled dome, silently begging every deity that might be willing to listen for patience. The most important topic on his personal agenda was to find out how he could get Rose back. Dealing with annoying ginger-haired humans that had appeared inside his frankly magnificent time ship against all odds wasn’t anywhere near the top ten of that list. It didn’t even make the top hundred.

“Where to?” he asked calmly.

“St Mary’s, Hayden Road, Chiswick, London, England, Earth, The Solar System.” She sounded increasingly annoyed with every word. And she seemed to have lost her volume control. If she’d ever had one, that was.

Earth, London even. Why didn’t that surprise him in the slightest? “And the date?” he added, a slight strain in his voice.

“What do you think what date it is? God, you’re really a Dumbo. Fits the ears. Christmas, of course!” And in an afterthought she added, “2007.”

“Oi! Why does everyone have to comment on my ears?”

“Well, they’re kind of... prominent? And now take me to the church! Before I miss it.” she demanded.

The Doctor sighed. The sooner he got rid of her the sooner he could find out how to get Rose back. He set the coordinates and sent the ship into the Vortex.

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Donna Noble stared at the strange big-eared man who had told her calmly that she was in space. Right now he was operating bizarre instruments which had caused the column in the middle of the room to move. If he even was a man. He had asked if she was human, now she came to think of it. “Are you an alien?” she blurted out.

He turned around to face her, his arms crossed over his chest. “Yes.”

“Oh my god, I’ve been abducted by an alien!”

“No!” he protested, looking horrified at the thought.

Then her glance fell at a blue jacket hanging over the railing. “You’ve abducted me – and I’m not the first one!” She held the jacket accusingly in his direction. “Where is she? Did you kill her?”
He stayed silent. A strange expression crossed his face.

“Oh my god, you killed her!”

“No! She’s... I lost her.”

“What do you mean – lost her?”

“She’s gone, alright?” His tone made clear that the subject was closed. He concentrated again on whatever he was doing and then the ship – This had to be a ship, hadn’t it? They’d been in space! – hit something and she grabbed the railing.

“Oi! Be careful!”

A few levers were flipped, a couple of buttons pressed and the column in the middle of the room stopped moving.


She opened the door. “Yeah, well, thanks for nothing.”

She left the ship, only to turn back and enter it again. She marched towards the Doctor and glared at him. “I said St Mary’s. That’s not even Chiswick.” Then she realised that there had been something very odd about the exterior of this, well, space ship, turned on her heel and left the cavernous room again. Slowly she turned around and looked at a blue box. This had to be a hallucination.

“It’s bigger on the inside,” the Doctor said matter-of-factly, as if he was used to that reaction. She hadn’t even noticed that he had followed her but he was leaning against the doorframe now, his arms crossed. “I don’t know what happened but she needs rest,” he said, “Chiswick’ll have to wait.”

“Great. Fat lot of good you are, Martian,” she said sarcastically.

“Oi! Martians look completely different! No spikes on my head, for instance.” He sounded offended. Another strange expression crossed his face, as if he was waiting for someone to come up with a remark. He left his place and took a few steps in her direction. “Anyway, there’s something wrong with my ship, as if...” Then he got a gleam in his eyes, as if he had just realised something, stared at his blue box and continued, muttering mostly to himself, “The last time she sounded like that in flight was right after the Gamestation – after she had looked into her heart.”


He took two more steps in her direction and held her at her shoulders, staring intently at her with blue-grey eyes. “Donna, I need you to think. Did anything unusual happen in the last few weeks?”

“Hey, I’m getting married every couple of days. What do you think of me? Of course there were unusual things going on!” The flippant comment felt already wrong while she was still speaking.

This time he didn’t seem offended. “Nah, not that sort of unusual. More like the alien sort of unusual. Lights in the sky, strange things you might have touched?”

This was too much. First she somehow ended up in space – with an alien! – instead of simply getting married and now he was blaming her for that? With a quick movement she brushed his arms off, turned around and raced towards the street.

“Taxi!”
He came after her. Great. Now she would not only be late to her own wedding, no, she’d drag along an alien in a black leather jacket. “Taxi!” she yelled again. The driver shot her a glance and then he did the unbelievable. He accelerated. “Oi!” Then she turned to the Doctor. “Do you’ve got money?”

“What for?”

“The taxi, you Dumbo! I don’t know how it works on Mars but here we have to pay for things.”

“Don’t you have any money?” A slight smirk crept up on his face. “Remember, I’m not from around here.”

“Do you see what I’m wearing? Have you ever heard of wedding dresses with pockets? So, do you have any money, or what?”

He patted his leather jacket with a somewhat comical expression, with a tiny bit of exasperation and lots of sadness underneath. “Nope.”

“Then do something about it.”

With another exasperated sigh the Doctor turned around, muttered something that sounded suspiciously like “Stupid apes!” and went into the direction of the nearest cash dispenser in a nearby alley. As soon as he had vanished around the corner a taxi stopped in front of her. Never one to look a gift horse into the mouth she climbed in, determined not to mention the lack of money. Maybe she could still make it.

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The Doctor waited impatiently for the customer in front of him to finish his business. Patience definitely wasn’t one of the character traits of this incarnation, he was just better at pretending. Pretending he wasn’t impatient, pretending he knew the solution, pretending he was alright. There was only one person who had always been able to see through his facade, and she wasn’t here. He was fairly certain she knew he didn’t have a clue how to get her back, but she believed in him. He really didn’t deserve her.

He still wanted to get rid of Donna as soon as possible, but he had to admit that his curiosity was piqued. Her appearance in his TARDIS should have been impossible, especially because he had reinforced the shielding after the Gamestation. Neither the quick scan he had done with his sonic screwdriver nor the more sophisticated instruments of his ship had revealed anything unexpected. But still, something was going on here. He was interrupted in his thoughts by the squealing of tyres. Donna was gone. Apparently she had managed to stop a taxi.

He was about to return to the TARDIS and repeat the scan when he noticed a couple of Santas with musical instruments standing in front of a banner of Henrik’s. He smiled briefly, lost in memories. He still owed the TARDIS for kicking him out in front of the shop. Meeting Rose had been the best thing that had ever happened to him. In the next second the Santas turned their instruments at him.

The Doctor had never liked the feeling of looking into a muzzle, although that sort of thing kept happening to him with surprising regularity.

He moved fast. With a fluid motion he pointed the sonic screwdriver at the cash dispenser, causing it to spill its contents and nearly shocking the customer in front of him to death, and broke into a run, avoiding the people who were already fighting about the money on the street. When he reached the corner he could see a taxi taking the next bend, Donna in the back seat and a Santa driving.

“Bugger!” He dashed back to the TARDIS.
Three minutes later he detected the taxi on the motorway. The TARDIS sounded as if she was in pain.

“Oh, no, no, no, no, no! Come on! Please, old girl. Just a little bit longer!”

He quickly adjusted the settings, fixing various levers in place with a buzz of his sonic screwdriver. Then he opened the doors. Donna was banging against the window and wildly pointing at the Santa in front of her. If he didn’t know better he would have thought the driver was wearing a Cylon costume from Battlestar Galactica. He directed the sonic at the door of the taxi and unlocked it.

“Donna!” he yelled. “You’ve got to jump!”

“You’re kidding me, right?”

“Do I look as if I was kidding? Jump!”

“I’m not jumping on a motorway. I’m in my bloody wedding dress, in case you haven’t noticed!”

The Doctor pointed in the general direction of the console with his sonic screwdriver to adjust the setting of the accelerator, praying it would work and his ship would hold out a little bit longer.

“Donna, I’m only saying this once,” he shouted, as soon as it looked that the TARDIS would do his bidding for another couple of minutes. “Whatever they are, they want you for some reason. And I don’t think it’s a good one. So, your decision. Jump or stay.”

She stared at him intently. “The woman you lost... Did she trust you?”

“She does. She does trust me.” He emphasized the present tense. “She’s not dead, Donna. Now jump!”

She jumped. And nearly managed to knock him unconscious.

Two minutes later the Doctor landed on the roof of a council estate building, the TARDIS groaning pitifully. Something was very much not right with his ship. She had never sounded like that before, as if someone was tearing her heart out. He stroked the console affectionately. “We’ll just leave you to rest, old girl.”

Donna had already left the ship and was sitting on the edge of the roof. He sat down next to her. “For a space ship she really doesn’t do that much flying.” She looked as if she hadn’t even heard him. “Did you miss it?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Not your fault.”

He nodded and grinned suddenly. “That’s a change.” He pulled out the sonic screwdriver, searched his pockets for some time and eventually found a gasket in the depths of his leather jacket. He adjusted the setting and soniced it for a minute. “Give me your hand.” He put the gasket on her pinkie.

“Great. Rub it in!” Donna said sarcastically, staring at the little black ring on her finger. “God, that looks as if it has engine grease on it.”

“Oi, what do you take me for? That’s a perfectly good gasket I’ve changed into a biodamper. With a
bit of luck they won’t be able to detect you now. Whoever they are.”

“Robot Santas. That’s insane. What are they? Are they behind all of this?”

“Nah, they’re more like mercenaries. I’ve never seen a robot with enough imagination to successfully take over the world in my life, and that includes the Cybermen.”

She looked at him questioningly.

“At the end of July? Big metal men everywhere on the planet, epic battle in the sky over London?”

“Holiday in Spain.”

“They had Cybermen in Spain.”

“Scuba-diving.”

Great. Whenever he ran out of luck he did it thoroughly. Another ignorant human and another incident with aliens. At least his day couldn’t get much worse. With that rather pessimistic thought he got up and held out his hand for Donna. Time to find out what was going on. She stared at him.

“Well, don’t you want to find out what happened to your family? And your fiancée?” Eventually she took his hand and got up. A thought occurred to him. “Where did you say you met?”

“H.C. Clements. I was temping. And he made me coffee. That just doesn’t happen. But Lance is the head of personnel, and he made me coffee.”

He smiled, ignored her next words and remembered another couple who’d told him where they’d met. Street corner, two a.m. And he’d had that adventure as well. For a few short weeks, with Rose.

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“Pete?” Rose said, her voice low. They were on their way back from Norway, where she had done the hardest thing she’d ever had to do; saying goodbye to the Doctor. Although she refused to believe that she would never see him again. She had made it back to him once before, against all odds, and she wasn’t going to give up hope. Ever.

Jackie and Mickey were fast asleep in the backseat of the battered Jeep. Pete answered without taking his eyes from the unfamiliar road. “Yeah?”

She had to tell somebody, and it felt easier to talk to Pete first. He wasn’t involved in the emotional mess that had overshadowed the end of her relationship with Mickey and turned her mum into a fury whenever the Doctor was mentioned. Both of them had never really forgiven him the year that hadn’t existed for her. Oh, they got along, especially since he had sent her back from the Gamestation, but it still felt like they were barely tolerating him for her sake. And that hurt. Pete might not be her father, but he was a friend and that was what she needed right now.

She could predict how her mum would react. There would be lots of shouting involved, the Doctor would be called a cradle-robber, and then her mum would tell her to get over it and start a new life. Now they had money she could do so much better, she would say. As if that had ever mattered to her. On a certain level she knew her mum only wanted the best for her. She’d been a single-parent raising a child on a council estate until they’d ended up in this universe. Rose had seen how she had struggled, and she could understand that her mum would rate financial security fairly high.

She snorted. She had fallen in love with an alien who owned nothing but a blue box and had ended
up paying for his chips more times than she could remember. But the Doctor had given her his hearts, and that meant more to her than any pretty boy with too much time and money on his hands ever could. He was the most powerful being in the universe and he had chosen her. She still didn’t know how she could possibly deserve such a gift.

“He asked me to marry him,” she blurted out before she had a chance to change her mind. “Well, his people’s version of marriage, actually, but it means the same.”

Pete looked at her and a genuine smile appeared on his face. Then he turned his attention back to the road. There hadn’t been any traffic for miles, but the road was narrow and the terrain unfamiliar. When they reached a part that went straight ahead for about a mile he looked at her again and took her hand, squeezing it gently. “I don’t know what to say,” he admitted eventually, his eyes back on the road. “I’m happy for you, of course, for both of you actually. I could see how you felt when you first got here. But you said he didn’t know if he could ever get here.”

“I know,” she replied quietly. Then she grinned. “But two persons as stubborn as we are should find a way without endangering two universes.”

Pete smiled back. “Definitely.” Then he asked, “Did you tell Jacks?”

“No.” She paused. “I don’t know if I can. I know what she’s going to say. I could practically write the dialogue. It’s a discussion we’ve had too many times since he brought me back one year later than he intended. I can’t bear that right now.”

“Don’t you think you underestimate her?”

Rose sighed. “Maybe. Probably. She’s my mum and she loves me. But I can’t tell her now. Would you keep this to yourself for a bit?”

Pete nodded. “Of course. Take your time, but I think you should tell her.”
Of course it had to be Torchwood. He should have known. And to make things worse the energy that was responsible for Donna’s disappearance from the church was so ancient that he hadn’t even bothered to scan for it. Mostly because there was only one place in the entirety of time and space where it should exist in pure form – in the heart of his TARDIS. But someone had found a way to extract it and dose Donna with it. Not to mention that Huon particles were one of the very few substances a simple biodamper couldn’t hide. Fantastic. Just what he needed.

The Doctor crossed the room with a few large steps. A quick glance out of the window confirmed his suspicions. The Santas had found them.

Then the Christmas decoration came to life and his day got one hell of a lot worse. Suddenly the Santas were standing in the room, remote controls in their hands.

“Donna!” the Doctor yelled. “Get the people out of here!” For a few seconds Donna simply stared at him and he gestured at her impatiently. “Move!”

Eventually she complied. He shoved every thought not related to the current situation into the back of his mind. He couldn’t afford to be distracted right now.

Remote control. He quickly adjusted the settings of his sonic screwdriver and blocked every frequency that had ever been used for that specific purpose throughout the universe. The robots stopped dead, just in time before they would have pressed really impressive red buttons on their respective remote controls. Given his vast experience with threatening red buttons that meant that there had to be explosives in the room.

“Donna!” he yelled again, while he disabled the motivators in the robots with his sonic. Now whoever was controlling them could try.

“Yes, Doctor?” She sounded annoyed. Again. It seemed that was her normal state of being. Well, he’d deal with that after he had found out what was going on here. He changed the setting of his sonic screwdriver once again and scanned for a signal strong enough to control the Santas.

“Get us some transport,” he ordered in a tone not even his..., uh, Rose’s harpy of mother would have questioned for longer than it took him to say Raxacoricofallapatorius. And since when exactly did he refer to Jackie as his mother-in-law, at least in his thoughts? Rose would be laughing her head off if she knew that.

“Where are we going?”

“H.C. Clements. And bring your fiancée,” he told her, his tone somewhere between grumpy and excited.

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Bringing the fiancée had at least solved the transport problem. Half an hour later they entered H.C. Clements and the Doctor went for the nearest computer terminal.

“Hey, that’s confidential!” Lance protested.

The Doctor considered him with a long suffering glare and decided to ignore him. “You might think H.C. Clements are just fancy locksmiths, but they’ve been founded by Torchwood,” he began the
day's lecture on the mysterious ways of the universe. He pointed the sonic screwdriver at the screen, overrode the access control and began to type furiously.

“Who are they?” Donna asked.

He answered her question without looking at her, his eyes never leaving the screen. “They were behind the battle of Canary Wharf.” When that didn’t evoke a response he continued, “Cybermen invasion?”

“Holiday in Spain, remember?”

He sighed in frustration. “Donna, you should do something about that big picture of yours.”

“Why?”

“Because you keep missing it. But still... Why dose you with Huon particles?”

His gaze fell on the slightly magnetic box the owner of this desk used to store paper-clips and he could have banged his head on the desk. Stupid, him. He should have seen it much earlier. He emptied the box and took a single clip.

“Huon energy is a very ancient sort of energy, and nowadays there’s only one place in the universe where you should find it in pure form: In the heart of my TARDIS. So, imagine that this box is the TARDIS and the magnet in it is her heart. And this,” he held up the paper-clip, “is you. Then the particles activated and,” he flipped the clip at the box, where it got stuck, “you were pulled to her. Easy.” He beamed at her.

Donna stared at him incredulously. Then she wacked his arm. “Ouch! What was that for?” he asked, rubbing it. Being around Donna turned out to be at least as dangerous as being in the vicinity of Jackie Tyler.

“I'm. Not. A. Paper-clip! Bloody Martian!”

He grinned. “Come on, it could be worse. I might have compared you to a H4 pencil.”

Donna glared at him. If looks could kill he would be regenerating right now. He turned to her fiancée. “Lance, what was H.C. Clements working on?”

“I don’t know. I'm the head of personnel, not a bloody project manager,” Lance replied dismissively.

The Doctor rolled his eyes and ignored the comment in favour of the computer. A few commands, then the monitor flickered and showed a building plan. He stared at it intently for a few seconds and raised an eyebrow. “That’s interesting.”

He was already halfway through the door when he turned around and noticed that Donna and Lance weren’t following. “What are you waiting for? Come on!” He gestured impatiently.

Donna recovered and tugged at Lance’s hand. “What’s interesting?” she asked.

“That was the official building plan on the screen. And it showed just one basement level.”

“So what?”

“Then how come the lift has got a button for lower basement?”

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This opportunity was as good as any, Rose decided. Thankfully her mum and Mickey were still asleep in the back. She had been thinking about what she wanted to do with her life since she had come to this universe, and today’s events had made it painstakingly clear that her stay here would probably be longer than she thought. “Pete?”

“Yes, Rose?”

“I’d like to switch departments. At work,” she clarified. After three weeks of working part-time for Torchwood she was absolutely certain that she would never be happy in research. “Don’t get me wrong, it’s interesting and I’m willing to help out whenever they need my, well, expertise sounds a bit overblown, don’t you think?”

“But I thought you liked it there? What do you want to do instead?”

“All that poking and prodding at alien artefacts is just... I don’t know... It’s different when you’ve been out there, seen things, done stuff. From the moment the Doctor took me to see the end of the world I knew that I would never be happy with an ordinary life.”

Pete looked as if he was going to say something, but she didn’t give him a chance to get a word in. “Yeah, I know that working with Torchwood R&D is not exactly what most people would call ordinary, but being stuck in a lab guessing if the thing I’m examining is a weapon or a hair dryer is driving me crazy. Mum will probably kill me, and she will definitely kill you if you support me, but the only thing I ever wanted to do was field work.”

“Rose...” Pete began tentatively.

“Don’t tell me it’s dangerous,” she interrupted him. “I know that. I’ve been doing that sort of things for more than two years. And remember, I was in the factory with you. I’m not going to faint if someone points a gun at me.” She gave him a wry grin. ”I’m jeopardy-friendly, after all.”

“Rose, I don’t know what your life was like with the Doctor, but endangering yourself is not going to bring him back,” Pete said carefully.

“I know that, Pete. And despite what you may think I’m not reckless and I am able to follow rules.” When it was important. In other circumstances, not so much. “I have learned my lesson. The hard way.” It was unlikely she would ever forget seeing her real dad die in front of her, for one of her mistakes.

“But you probably would have to kill people.”

She sighed. “Believe me, I know that. I’m not naive. It wouldn’t be the first time. Mum believes I’ve got nightmares because of what happened in the lever room. She’s not entirely wrong, I admit that, but that’s not all. I’m responsible for the death of at least one person.” She still saw Toby’s face in her dreams, heard the words of the Beast. Rationally she knew that she’d had to pull the trigger, that everyone in the little spaceship would have been dead if she hadn’t, but that didn’t make it easier. Not to mention that she had nearly managed to bring about the end of the world and almost killed the Doctor. During the first few nights after their visit to 1987 she had dreamed that she was the only human being left on Earth, condemned to wander the planet for eternity. At some point she would discover the TARDIS somewhere and enter the ship, hoping she would find him inside, waiting for her. Then a hologram would come to life, over and over replaying the last few seconds before the Reaper took him. Every time she’d woken screaming, only to find him in her room, telling her that he was alive, that everything was okay. Sometimes she still wondered how she could possibly have deserved his forgiveness. In his place she would have probably dumped herself on Earth.
Pete’s words interrupted her thoughts. “Rose, if that sort of thing is affecting you so much, don’t you think you were better off with another job?”

With great effort she shook off the memories. “Pete, that I have nightmares only means that I’ve got a conscience. Who would you prefer to do that job? Someone who cares or a machine?”

“If you have to ask then you don’t know me at all.” He sounded offended.

“I know. I’m sorry, Pete.” She meant it.

He nodded. “Drop Operatives an application and if they consider it then I’ll support you.” Then he smiled at her. “But you’re going to be the one who tells Jackie.”

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Maintenance tunnels were the same everywhere in the universe, in every timeframe. Oh, there were minimal differences, of course. Some had stone or concrete walls, in space stations or star ships they were plain steel, but there was one thing they all had in common, even if it should be impossible. They smelled musty. This one was no exception.

“You know, if this was Harry Potter these would be brooms,” Donna grinned, pointing at the electrical scooters that were conveniently parked in a corner.

The Doctor grinned back. “Donna, if this was Harry Potter I would summon the motorcycle I’ve stored somewhere in the TARDIS.”

Donna laughed. Lance looked far less amused.

Five minutes later, after discovering that the entire project was hidden under the Thames flood barrier, they found what they were looking for. A full-fledged scientific laboratory for extracting Huon particles. The Doctor had to admit that he was impressed. The only thing it was missing was the cliché evil scientist.

“It doesn’t make sense. What would anyone want with enormous quantities of Huon particles in liquid form?” he murmured thoughtfully, while he wandered through the lab.

“What do they do?” Donna asked.

“Apart from the fact that they unravel the atomic structure, not much. That’s the reason my people got rid of them.”

“Your people? Who are you working for?” Lance enquired.

The Doctor grinned manically. “Oh, I’m not working for anybody. Not anymore. But I’m incredibly curious. Which makes me wonder what’s hidden behind that door.” He pointed with the sonic screwdriver, but before he could unlock it he was interrupted by Donna.

“Wait! You are not going to open that door until you answer a couple of questions. One: Somebody put that stuff into me?”

“Yes,” he replied, staring at her intently, taking in her stained wedding dress. He had the nagging feeling that something about her was important. Something extremely obvious. Like... “The wedding!”

“Yeah, you ruined it.”
“Oi! Not my fault! You were the one who appeared in my TARDIS,” he protested.

“Are you saying this is my fault?” Her eyes narrowed dangerously.

“Donna, what did I say about that big picture of yours? Unless you dosed yourself with Huon particles it’s definitely not your fault. Anyway, it was your wedding, you were excited, practically a walking hormone cocktail. That activated the particles and charged you until you got attracted by a magnet, in other words, the heart of the TARDIS.”

“But what does that mean: Am I safe?”

The Doctor stayed silent.

“You said your people got rid of the particles. Why did they do that?” she pressed.

“They were deadly,” he admitted, almost matter-of-factly, avoiding her eyes and staring at the wall.

“Oh my god.”

He took her hand and finally looked at her. “I’ll do whatever I can to sort this, Donna.”

She nodded slowly.

He held her gaze for another few seconds, then he turned around and with a mighty pull he opened the door, only to stare incredulously at a full grown spider-like creature that was sitting in a web covering the entire ceiling of the cavernous room.

“Fantastic,” he muttered sarcastically. “Racnoss.”

Compared with what was in front of him he would have preferred the evil scientist, in every possible stage of insanity from your standard madman up to a narcissistic megalomaniac. And that included the combined forces of the Master and the Rani. He really should stop thinking that his day couldn’t get any worse, since fate seemed inclined to prove him wrong. As soon as he had finished the thought a couple of robots lined up along the wall of the room, which only emphasised his point.

Then he discovered the hole in the ground. “Oh, someone’s been digging.”

“Down and down, all the way to the centre of the Earth,” the Racnoss Empress said from her position high in the cobweb.

“What for?” he asked, slightly distracted by watching Lance slowly retreating into the lab.

“Dinosaurs?” Donna suggested tentatively.

“Nah. This isn’t a Jules Verne novel.” He grinned at her.

She grinned back and asked, “But what are they?”

“The Racnoss. They are an ancient species from the Dark Times. I thought they were extinct, extinguished in a great war. Apparently I was wrong. They are carnivores, omnivores, even.”

“They eat people?”

“Oh, more than that. They devoured whole planets. That’s why the Fledgling Empires went to war with them.”
The Doctor saw Lance appearing on the balcony, an axe in his hands. The bloke hadn’t struck him as the adventurous type and that could only mean two things: either he had misjudged him, or Lance tried to double-cross them. Maybe he was too pessimistic in this incarnation but he somehow doubted that Donna’s fiancé was going to be of help.

“They killed every one of us, except for me,” the Racnoss Empress sneered, interrupting his thoughts.

“But what does that have to do with me? Why did you dose me with that Huon energy thing?” Donna demanded. She lacked the foot tapping and the dye job, but apart from that she reminded him strongly of a very pissed off Jackie Tyler.

The Doctor glanced at her and saw that her gaze was directed at Lance while she was speaking. It looked like she was trying to distract the Empress.

The creature ignored her.

“Hey, lady, look at me when I’m talking to you. What do you want with me?” Donna shouted. He was impressed, he grudgingly admitted to himself. Not everyone would try to distract a spider the size of a small cottage from what was going on behind their back, although he suspected it would be in vain.

“Oh, the bride is feisty!”

“You bet. And I don’t care what you are, a spider is just a spider, and an axe is still an axe. Lance, do it!”

The Racnoss turned around and hissed at Lance, who held the axe above his head. In the last possible moment she stopped, Lance dropped the axe, and they began to laugh. Not too pessimistic, then, the Doctor concluded.

“Lance, do it!” Donna repeated, sounding annoyed.

Lance laughed harder.

“I’m sorry,” the Doctor said quietly.

“What for?” She looked at him for a brief moment, thoroughly confused, then she returned her gaze to her fiancé. “Get her, Lance.” There was a trace of desperation in her voice.

“God, you’re so thick,” Lance said disdainfully.

“He brought you coffee, Donna,” the Doctor explained slowly. “Every single day, for six months. Lance was the one who dosed you with Huon particles.”

Finally Donna understood. “But we were getting married,” she said in a small voice.

“You really don’t get it, do you?” Lance sneered. “Of course I had to say yes. I couldn’t risk you running off. I had already invested too much effort in you. But really, have you ever listened to you? No wonder you never managed to pull anybody else. All that endless jabbering about celebrities and diets. And don’t get me started on the sex. I should be recognised as a saint for spending half a year with you.”

Donna winced.
“So what did she promise you?” the Doctor asked, interrupting Lance’s tirade.

The other man turned his attention to him. “You know, the big picture, you keep missing it yourself. The Human race is nothing. She gave me the chance to see what’s out there. In the grand scheme of things, humanity is nothing. Don’t you understand that, Doctor?”

“Who is he, this little physician?” the Racnoss Empress asked, interrupting her consort.

“Oh, I’m just a stranger, passing through,” the Doctor answered evasively, digging in his pocket for his sonic screwdriver and fiddling with the setting. “But still, what are you doing here?”

Lance grinned. “This isn’t like a bad movie, where you can get the baddies to reveal their plan, Doctor.”

“Kill him. All we need is her!” the Empress ordered.

The Santas raised their weapons. Again. He really hated the feeling of looking into a muzzle.

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“You know, you’re completely missing the obvious here,” the Doctor said, still fiddling with the setting of his sonic screwdriver.

“And what would that be?” the Empress asked disdainfully.

“This.” He pressed the button of his sonic screwdriver and prayed that his TARDIS would have recovered enough to pull this stunt. Apparently she had, because his faithful ship materialised around Donna and him. Although he winced when the bullets hit her hull. She really disliked bullet holes in her exterior. Now she would be irritable for weeks.

“Sorry, old girl.” He patted the console affectionately, but received only an indignant hum in response. “When this is over we’ll just float in the Vortex for awhile to let you rest. But now...” He adjusted a few knobs and loosened the handbrake. The time rotor began to move.

“How did you do that?” Donna asked, her back turned to him, her voice wavering. He knew she was still processing what had happened and needed someone to comfort her, but truth be told, he was rubbish at comforting, although Rose had told him differently. He had a long list of unsuccessful attempts to console companions as proof.

“I just reversed the charge of the particles, and they drew the TARDIS to you, like a magnet.” He tried to keep the conversation on the problem at hand. Much safer that way, much less memories.

“And where are we going now?”

The Doctor flipped a switch and the time rotor slowly came to a halt. “The beginning,” he replied softly, unable to tear his eyes away from the sight on the monitor. Here he was, standing in the same spot in the universe, only ten billion years earlier, give or take a few hundred million years. And without her. He moved his fingers. His hand felt empty, incomplete, as if it was missing a limb. Right. Forget that bit about less memories. The universe could be a bitch sometimes.

“Of what?” Donna’s less than enthusiastic question interrupted his musings.

He straightened, walked over to the doors and opened them. “Donna Noble, welcome to the creation of the world.”
The view in front of her eyes was unlike anything Donna had ever imagined. Dust and gas clouds sparkled in a million colours where the sun hit them. Larger rocks floated through space, every once in a while colliding, breaking in to smaller parts, or merging into bigger ones.

It took her some time to take in his meaning, but then she asked, “Where’s the Earth?”

“All around us. All those rocks and dust.”

She wiped her eyes. “Puts the wedding into perspective. Lance was right. We’re nothing, compared to this.” For a few seconds she simply stared at the sight.

“Lance is an idiot,” the Doctor said, interrupting her thoughts. “Just look at it. This whole process, it’s beautiful. Even the end of the world is not the end. I’ve been there, Donna, I’ve seen it. You just march on, spread out across the galaxy and mark eternity with memorable events: birthdays, weddings, even deaths. That’s what living means. Everything else is just vegetating.”

They gazed out of the doors for some time, both of them lost in thoughts.

“That looks like the Isle of Wight,” she said eventually in an attempt to lighten the atmosphere.

He smiled at her. “Maybe it is. See, it begins with a single rock, a bit heavier than the others. It becomes the centre of gravity, pulling everything else in. And after a few million years...”

“Earth,” she completed his sentence.

“Exactly. But the question is... what was that first rock?”

Suddenly Donna saw something moving through the dust that looked suspiciously like a star-shaped rock, drawing a line of dust and gas towards itself. “Look!”

The Doctor muttered something indistinguishable under his breath and spun into action. He closed the doors, headed over to the column in the middle of the room and began to twist knobs and turn dials while Donna just stared at him. “Hold that lever down,” he ordered, pointing at a large bar next to a line of green lights.

She didn’t react, still trying to process what had happened.

“The Racnoss starship was that first rock,” he explained impatiently, while he furiously turned dials and flipped switches. “And I’ve got the dim feeling that they know that we know. We have to get back as soon as possible and stop them from whatever they’re planning. Otherwise the end of the world might come a couple of billion years sooner than it should. So hold that lever down. Now, Donna!” He gave her a glare that would probably haunt her in her dreams and she complied without another word.

The Doctor dived under the grating, pulled something out that looked like the Star Trek version of a surfboard, although it was much smaller, and began to loosen a panel from the bottom of the console, quickly connecting the intergalactic surfboard to his ship.

“What are you doing?”

“Giving us a bit of protection. Hopefully. Do you see the blue button next to the line of red lights? When I say now, press it.”
He fiddles with a few cables for about a minute then shouted, “Now!”

She pressed the button. Nothing happened.

“Donna! For god’s sake, push that button! Now!” the Doctor yelled from beneath the console.

That did it. This was her wedding day, she had ended up in a space ship that was bigger on the
inside, her guests had had the reception without her, her fiancée had only agreed to marry her so he
could feed her to a giant alien spider and now another alien was treating her as if she was an idiot.
“Bloody Martian! I did push the button! I’m not stupid!” she yelled back.

The Doctor mumbled something that sounded like “Could’ve fooled me,” and swapped a few cables
which connected the surfboard thing to the console. Suddenly the ship jerked violently and the
Doctor let out a sharp cry of pain. Admittedly her sympathy was limited.

It was difficult, what with him being buried under the console, but somehow he managed to give her
an accusing glare. “What’d you do?”

“Nothing,” she gave back indignantly.

He got up and stared at one of the monitors for a few seconds, then he began to type commands.
“They’re reversing it!”

“What?”

“Remember how I called the TARDIS to get us out of that lab? They must’ve figured out how to
undo it.”

“Well, isn’t there something you can do to stop us? Like a handbrake or something?”

“What do you think I’ve been trying to do, Donna?” He kicked the console in frustration and
smashed his hand down on the button he had asked her to press earlier. Men. If it doesn’t work, use
force. It seemed not even aliens were different in that regard.

Unfortunately the results proved him right. With a stuttering sound the column in the middle came to
live and began to move, although it was nowhere near as smooth as it had been before.

A manic smile lit the Doctor's face and he began to adjust the instruments on the console. “Good
girl! Hold on, we’re landing!”

Seven seconds later the ship hit the ground.

Of course Donna ended up on her back on the grating. She would never do this again. At this point
she wasn’t even sure if she meant the wedding, the spider or travelling in this absolutely mad blue
box, but she definitely would never do this again. Ever.
Chapter Three

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Rose could hear Jackie stirring in the back of the car. It had been more than two hours since they had left the beach and it would be another thirty minutes until they reached Bergen and could take a ferry back to England, to the place her mum had already begun to call home.

Home, she mused. Her home had been a flat on a council estate for nineteen years, until it had been replaced by a blue box that was bigger on the inside. The day they had nearly lost the TARDIS on Krop Tor she had finally realised that home wasn’t a place, not even a blue box that could appear anywhere in the universe, anytime. Home was the people she loved, not the place where she lived.

The Void separated her from the person who meant most to her, who she trusted with her life, heart and soul. Without him she felt incomplete, afloat at sea. But she couldn’t let her life just happen to her. This was not who she was. She was going to carve out a life for herself, until she met him again. If only it wasn’t so bloody hard.

“Rose?” Jackie’s voice interrupted her musings.

“Yes, mum?” She sighed inwardly. In an unexpected streak of reserve Jackie had refrained from asking her what else the Doctor had said on the beach. It looked as if her reprieve was over.

“What did he say?”

She kept her eyes focused on the scenery in front of her and answered calmly, “Like I said. He didn’t know if he could ever cross the Void.”

“Oh, sweetheart. I’m so sorry. I know how much you loved him.”

Rose knew her mum meant it, but it would probably have hurt less if she hadn’t used the past tense. Her mum of all people should know that one didn’t just stop loving somebody, even if he was gone. She nodded slowly, trying to hold herself back from reacting to the choice of words.

Jackie was silent for a few minutes, then she continued, “I know you don’t want to hear it, Rose, but you have to decide what you’re going to do with the rest of your life. He’s not coming back.”

Her mum sounded so secure in her assessment of the Doctor. Rose took a deep breath, restraining herself from leashing out at Jackie and turned around to finally face her.

“You don’t know that,” she gave back, sounding surprisingly calm even in her own ears.

“Sweetheart, you said it yourself: He doesn’t know if he can come here,” Jackie reasoned.

“But that doesn’t mean he won’t try,” Rose said with conviction. The Doctor would bend every known and possibly even a couple of unknown physical laws to get to her. Even if it would take him years to find a safe way, he’d come.

“But you can’t spend your life waiting for him.”

“I never said that I would do that, mum. I’ve already made a decision. Pete said last week that he would like me to work full-time for Torchwood as soon as I’ve got my A-levels.”
“You did what?” Jackie screeched, staring at the back of his head accusingly.

“I offered Rose a full-time job,” Pete gave back calmly, his eyes never leaving the road. “She is good at what she’s doing and I would be an idiot not to take her.”

Rose briefly closed her eyes in relief, thankful that he had kept her requests to himself. She really didn’t want to discuss the possibility of doing field work right now, although this topic might be slightly safer than the other one.

“But it’s dangerous!”

“And it’s her life and her decision, Jacks.”

Jackie glared at Mickey. “Say something.”

He glared back. “No. I’m not getting into this, Jackie. This is Rose’s decision.”

Rose shot him a thankful glance.

Jackie turned back to Rose. “Sweetheart, think about it. You don’t have to do this. You could go to university, make something of your life,” she said, her eyes begging her to give in.

Rose sighed inwardly. She knew her mum was afraid that she would lose her. She had been like this since the year she had missed, and the carefully edited stories about her travels with the Doctor had done nothing to ease her mum’s fears. But she had been lost for an ordinary life almost since the moment the Doctor first took her hand and told her to run.

“I already know what I’m going to do with my life. I told you before, mum. The Doctor showed me a better way to live. Yes, there were bad things that happened to us, but I still wouldn’t have missed it for the world.”

“But...”

Rose knew what her mum was going to say but she couldn’t bear it right now. So she interrupted her ruthlessly. “No, mum. My decision is final.”

She turned around, stared out of the windscreen and ignored all further attempts to start a conversation.

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When Donna finally got up the Doctor was already at the door. “Are you coming?” He raised an eyebrow expectantly.

She rubbed her elbow and glared at him, but followed him outside.

“But what do we do?”

He grinned. “No idea.”

The remark he was expecting never came. No Rose to call him out on his behaviour. His smile vanished and his hearts clenched at the memory.

Donna rolled her eyes. “I still don’t understand. What do they need me for?”

“When my people got rid of the Huon particles the Racnoss web at the centre of the Earth lost its
power source and they got stuck.”

“Wait. You’re telling me that they... they...”

“Exactly. You’re the key. They need you, or better, the particles Lance dosed you with, to refuel. Unfortunately that’s a bit of a problem if you take into account that their web is currently the centre of the Earth.”

Donna kept silent. He had known her for less than five hours and she had never been able to keep her mouth shut for that long. He turned around, only to find the corridor empty.

“Great!” She wasn’t even a companion and had already managed to violate rule number one. Although he had to admit that she might not have done it on purpose.

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In the last few minutes Donna had come quickly to the conclusion that she would count herself lucky if she never saw a spider again in her life. And the same applied to cobwebs, especially if she was tied up in them with her ex-fiancée.

“You’re supposed to say ‘I do’,” the Empress said.

“No chance,” Lance gave back.

“Say it!”

He spat the words out. “I do.”

Sometimes Donna really wished that looks could kill. Although she was not entirely certain who deserved that fate more: Lance or the Empress. “I do,” she snapped.

“I don’t,” the spider said. If she had eyebrows she probably would have raised them in contempt. Then her tone became ecstatic. “Activate the particles. Purge every last one.”

A faint glow began to surround Donna’s body, getting stronger second by second, and Lance began to glow as well.

“Release!” the Empress ordered, and the particles dived into the hole, as if they were following an order. But sentient particles were impossible, weren’t they? A tiny voice at the back of Donna’s mind chose this moment to point out that bigger-on-the-inside space ships that could travel in time hadn’t been on her list of possible things either.

“The secret heart unlocks. My children will waken from their sleep and feast on human flesh.” She raised her arms like a priestess. “The web-star shall come to me.”

A scratching sound reached Donna’s ear and became gradually louder. Something was moving in the hole, and it was coming nearer. Lance began to fight against his restraints, turning towards the Empress. “Use her, use her, not me!”

The Empress laughed. “Oh, my funny little Lance. The Empress does not approve.” She raised her arms again, and the threads that held Lance ruptured. He tumbled into the hole, screaming, but not even his cry could drown out the scratching sounds from deep down completely. “They never learn,” she commented scathingly.

“No, they don’t,” agreed a voice with a distinctive Northern accent. “But on the rare occasions when
they don’t do something incredibly stupid they’re completely fantastic.” Donna turned to the
direction the voice had come from and discovered a dark figure standing on the ground floor. Then
the man took off the golden mask he was wearing and removed a black cloak.

“Doctor!” she yelled.

“Hello!” He waved cheerfully and aimed the sonic screwdriver at her. The web around her loosened.

“I’m going to fall!” she screeched.

“Nah. You’re just gonna... swing!” He grinned at her manically.

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Unfortunately Donna’s momentum was a bit larger than Rose’s had been when she had saved him
from the Autons, but he managed to stop her before she could crash into the metal staircase.
Unfortunately Donna herself was also a bit larger than Rose, so the impact knocked the air out of his
lungs. And unfortunately he couldn’t keep his mouth shut. “You’re heavy,” he complained, when he
had finally dragged enough air back into his lungs to be able to speak again.

She swatted him.

He rubbed his arm. Again. He was sensing a trend. “What was that for?”

“I’m not heavy! Bloody alien!”

“I could’ve let you crash into that wall, you know.” He grinned at her.

For exactly five seconds Donna just gaped at him. “Oi!”

“The doctor-man amuses me,” the Empress said, slowly coming nearer.

The Doctor winced inwardly. He really could have done without that view. His instincts screamed at
him to just kill her and her breed. The urge had been there from the moment he had first seen the
Empress. For all their arrogated superiority Time Lords were no better than humans. Most people on
this planet were afraid of spiders on a certain level, due to some archaic genetic trait. But with the
Time Lords the fear ran even deeper, and that had nothing to do with the slightly larger scale of the
Racnoss in comparison with Earth spiders.

Even in the Dark Times his planet had been protected by almost impenetrable barriers. The Racnoss
were one of the very few species that had ever managed to break them, almost destroying their entire
civilisation. The fear of them had been hard-wired into his people’s DNA. Until his forth life no
other species had ever again directly invaded his planet, and that had been his own doing. Their
invasion had been the main reason why his people had decided to join the other Fledgling Empires in
their crusade against the Racnoss. Getting rid of the Huon particles had been more of a by-product.

Urging Donna to go first, he slowly climbed the stairs in his back, never turning his back on the
Empress. This would end here for good, one way or another. When he reached the first landing he
leaned casually against one of the vertical joists and crossed his arms, glaring at the giant spider.

“I’m just saying this once, so I suggest you listen carefully. I give you a choice. I can find you a
planet, along with the chance to coexist. Or else I’ll end this here.”

The Empress laughed.
“I take that as a ‘no’.”

“Oh, how clever you are, doctor-man. And now I’ll show you what happens next.” She raised her arms and the robots that lined the walls like tin soldiers raised their weapons. “At arms!”

He sighed inwardly. It wasn’t only humans who never learned. One buzz with his sonic screwdriver and the Santas shut down for the second time in a couple of hours.

The Empress turned her attention back to him. “Robo-forms are not necessary. My children will feast on Martian flesh.”

The Doctor rolled his eyes. “How many times? I’m not from Mars.” Honestly, this was worse than explaining quantum physics to Jackie Tyler. Not that he ever would have attempted to do that, at least not as long as he was still more or less sane.

“Then where are you from?”

For a long time he hadn’t been able to think about his home planet, let alone call it by its name. He hadn’t even told Rose, and she had been kind enough not to ask. “Gallifrey.”

“They murdered the Racnoss!” the Empress thundered.

“Oh, let’s not get into what you did when you invaded my planet, shall we?” he replied, sounding almost nonchalant, although he felt anything but.

She hissed at him, and he decided that he had given her enough chances. Time to end this for good.

He pressed a button on his sonic screwdriver and one of the tanks in the laboratory exploded. A wave of Huon particles in liquid form poured into the room. Its power caused the Empress to lose her stand. When the pull dragged her along and into the hole in the ground she screamed in unadulterated fury.

At another pressing of the button the remaining tanks in the lab exploded, the liquid flooding the cave and finally vanishing in the hole. Unfortunately not even this wouldn’t be enough to get rid of the Racnoss permanently. It was like flushing a spider down a drain. Literally. Not enough water, and it would come back eventually.

“And now for my next trick.” He turned to Donna. “Do you remember that I said the Huon particles were lethal?”

“Do you really think I would forget that? I have that stuff in me!” she almost screamed.

He scanned her quickly. “No you haven’t. It’s gone. The Empress drained you completely. Anyway, the thing about the particles being deadly wasn’t entirely true. In the beginning Huon particles were just a part of the barrier that separates the universe from the Void. They can be counteracted by Void stuff in combination with an extremely rare sort of energy. Which is just as well, because otherwise the universe would’ve turned into an incredibly large pile of dust aeons ago. The balance only skipped because the Racnoss used them as fuel.”

“And what exactly does that mean?” Donna spat out every word, apparently annoyed of him for some reason. Not that that was something new.

He grinned at her. “Did you ever wonder how the particles could drag you across an entire galaxy and through time into my TARDIS?”
She just stared at him.

“It wasn’t just the TARDIS that attracted the particles. You ended up there because she had been sending a projection through the Void at the time which amplified the effect, but it was mostly the Phyton energy bleeding out of a scar in the fabric of time and space that pulled you there. Although the TARDIS was the dip net that stopped you from ending up as a part of the barrier to the Void. Without her being connected to the Void the residual energy in the vicinity of London would have drawn you in. And believe me, you really wouldn’t have liked the side effects.”

“So you’re going to send them there?”

“Nah. Why do something complicated when there’s more than enough Phyton energy in the middle of London to get rid of every remaining Racnoss in existence?” He grinned manically.

If the Prime Minister was as efficient as he thought she would be, Harriet should have evacuated Canary Wharf by now. Two birds with one stone. He hadn’t done something about Torchwood yet, deeming the task of finding a way to send a message through the Void more important, but he wasn’t going to ignore its existence any longer. The things Torchwood had gotten hold of could alter the entire timeline of the Earth and destabilise the universe, and that was not going to happen as long as he had the chance to prevent it.

Although blowing up something with permission somehow took the fun out of it. Oh well, there were probably worse solutions to this particular problem.

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From her place on the stairs Donna watched the Doctor climbing back down. He walked towards the rim of the hole and stared down into the abyss, arms crossed, his eyes blazing with blue fire.

“Oi! Racnoss! Do you wanna know what happened to your precious web-star?”

An angry hissing was his answer.

“You really don’t know anything about Time Lords, do you? ‘Cos if you did you’d know that most of us were extremely unimaginative when it came to procreation. Boring, really, almost like knitting. So saying something like that about my mother isn’t going to work. Yours on the other hand... I imagine she had really weird taste in men. Oh, wait, she did. She devoured them, after all.”

The hissing got louder.

“Anyway, I had a chat with the Prime Minister earlier. Lovely woman, Harriet Jones. Very polite, under normal circumstances. Unfortunately, mind, that would be unfortunately for you, she really didn’t like your web-star wreaking havoc in the City of London. Especially not after the Cybermen and the Daleks last summer.”

Another hiss.

“Pity, that. You could have learned that you don’t mess with this planet. So, where was I? Oh, yes. She didn’t like it. And do you want to know what humans do if they don’t like something?”

This time the hissing was accompanied by a faint glow in the depths.

“They turn into a five-year-old with a temper tantrum. And break it. A nasty habit, but in this case probably understandable, don’t you think?”
The hissing sounded incredibly furious by now.

The Doctor winced. “Oh, tell me when you find one, would you? I’d love to have a few words with them. Although I’ve got the feeling that’s not going to happen anytime soon.” Despite his choice of words his voice was like ice. Donna shivered involuntarily.

Another angry hiss came out of the depths, and the shine intensified, while the Doctor continued to taunt the Racnoss. “I dunno if you’ve noticed, but you’re glowing. And did I mention the large amount of Phyton energy that’s leaking out here? If you ever paid attention in chemistry you might actually have a clue as to what that means.” Although the words sounded deceptively harmless the temperature in the cavernous room seemed to drop a few degrees.

This time the hiss sounded more like a furious scream, which was almost instantly followed by a blinding flash. Silence settled in the room, only to be replaced by something that sounded like distant thunder.

The Doctor stared into the abyss for a few seconds, standing completely still. The mad energy he had sported seemed to have left him. Eventually he turned towards the door to the lab.

“Doctor?” Donna was still standing on the first landing of the stairs, uncertain if she should go to him. “What happened?”

His voice sounded almost lifeless when he answered her. “I ended it. They got drawn to the massive amounts of Phyton energy in Canary Wharf and the particles reacted. Without the TARDIS being connected to the Void there was nothing to stop them. They’re gone.”

“You killed them?”

“You might have noticed that I gave them a chance first.” This time it was him hissing angrily at her, and the fury in his eyes made her stagger back a step.

He looked away and took a deep breath, apparently trying to calm himself down. After a few seconds his gaze returned to hers. “I didn’t want to kill them, Donna. I’d rather have taken them to another planet. But I couldn’t let them win. Everyone on Earth would have died if I had.” She could see the truth of this statement in his eyes. “That’s what I do, Donna: I make decisions because no one else will.”

Donna nodded in acknowledgement of his words, but didn’t trust her voice just yet. She didn’t know what to think. When he had been taunting the Racnoss it had almost seemed as if he enjoyed it, but she also believed that he hadn’t wanted to kill them.

She didn’t have much time to ponder his words, though, because the Doctor turned back into the direction of the door they had used when they had entered the room for the first time. “And now there’s only one thing left to do: Destroy the rest of this lab,” he noted grimly.

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The Doctor had to admit that the laboratory was surprisingly well stocked, even with a few things he would never have expected in this time frame. One more reason to do what he was about to do. With the chemicals available and the provided equipment it took him less than ten minutes to conjure a concoction that bore a striking resemblance to Nitro-9. Another five minutes later he had placed the explosives next to integral parts of the laboratory and was certain that the entire equipment would be thoroughly destroyed. After a bit of digging in his jacket he discovered a few time fuses and set the countdown, praying they would work properly. Just this once. Then he turned around and grabbed
Donna’s hand, a manic grin on his face. “Run!”

Two minutes later he shut the doors of the TARDIS behind them and sent them into the Vortex, then he leaned against the console, feeling exhausted. He hadn’t slept since he’d lost Rose. Not really, apart from a few catnaps. He couldn’t, and he wasn’t sure that would change anytime soon. After the Time War he had seen the battles in his dreams, the destruction of Florana, the fall of Arcadia, and, worst of all, the last days of Gallifrey, when insanity had blossomed like black henbane. The dreams had nearly driven him beyond the brink of madness.

Now every time he closed his eyes for as much as five minutes the same sequence repeated itself, over and over again. He saw the white wall in the lever room and Rose falling towards it, while he couldn’t move a single limb. She fell and Pete never appeared to catch her.

Rose was right. He needed someone to keep him company. Preferably her, but that wasn’t going to happen anytime soon. Right now he was completely out of his depths. He just couldn’t see a solution. And Rose would kill him if she ever found out that he had spent his entire time looking for a way to cross the Void.

So a new companion it was. Someone he could show the universe while looking for a way back to her. And he had to admit that Donna had impressed him once she had got over the ‘I’ve been abducted by an alien’ phase.

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The Doctor flipped a switch and adjusted a lever. The column in the middle of the room stopped moving and the noise of the engines turned down.

“Here we are. Still London, England, and still Christmas,” he said, gesturing towards the doors.

Donna opened the doors tentatively. She really didn’t fancy a sequel to the events of the day. She left the ship and found herself in a spot that looked almost familiar, although she had certainly never seen the large pile of rubble in front of her.

“Where are we?” she asked, her tone demanding an answer.

The Doctor had followed her and stopped dead in the door frame. At her question he winced visibly and when he answered her question he avoided her eyes.

“H.C. Clements.”

“You blew it up?!” she screeched.

He crossed his arms in a defensive posture. “How was I to know that the integral structure of the building wouldn’t even survive a minor vibration? Just be glad they haven’t begun to dig the new Tube tunnel yet. The building would have come down in seconds.”

“But you blew it up! That was my job, and you blew it up!”

Suddenly the Doctor began to chuckle.

“Do you think this is funny?” she demanded.

“Well, I sorta blew up Rose’s job on the day I met her.”

He grinned at her, although she could also see sadness in his eyes.
“That’s the woman you lost?” she asked, her annoyance dissolving into thin air.

He just nodded, apparently not going to continue the subject, then he straightened. “So, Donna Noble, what are you going to do now?”

She thought for a moment, the question being completely unexpected. “Oh well, since I’m not getting married and someone blew up my job... I dunno, travel? See the pyramids or the Taj Mahal, maybe, or the Acropolis.”

The Doctor considered her for what seemed to be a long time. “Do you want to really see it? Watch history happen in front of your eyes?” he asked finally.

“What do you mean?”

“See the pyramids being built, meet George Washington, piss off Queen Victoria, no, already done that...”

“You pissed off Queen Victoria?” she interrupted him.

“I just told her to run for her life. You would have thought she’d prefer that to being eaten by a werewolf. We could also have chips in the restaurant at the end of the universe...”

“That exists?” Wait, werewolf?

“Yep. But he got thing with the Vogons completely wrong. Blimey, do you always have to interrupt me?”

She grinned. “Of course.”

He gave her one of his manic grins in return. “So, what do you say? Come with me?”

She considered his offer for a moment then shrugged. “Oh, why not.”

“Fantastic.” He smiled genuinely, an expression that lit up his entire being, but after a second it vanished, only to be replaced by seriousness. “Be very sure, Donna. This life I lead, it’s dangerous. And I can’t promise that I will always able to keep you safe.”

She looked at him, really looked at him, and thought about his words. What he hadn’t said was probably even more important than what he had said. He hadn’t even been able to save the woman she suspected he loved, and it was killing him. He really needed a friend. She grinned at him.

“As long as you at least promise that there won’t be more giant spiders trying to eat me.”

“No visits to Arana Eight, then. But you’d miss out on the fantastic chocolate ice cream, you know.”

“Oh well, in that case...”

He grinned back. “Then what are you waiting for?”

Chapter End Notes

And now we finally go completely AU...
“Can’t we just pretend that I’m a distant relation or something?” Rose asked, leaning against the mantelpiece in the living room. Although she should probably call it the drawing room, given the size and the interior, she thought. Expensive furniture and carefully selected paintings showed money and taste. She had dreaded entering the house after Canary Wharf, the memories of the Cybermen breaking windows and killing the guests of the alternate Jaqueline Tyler’s birthday party still fresh, but Pete had changed most of the layout during the last years, apparently driven by the same memories.

They had returned from Bergen three days ago. Since then she had tried to come to terms with the fact that there was no easy way back, even if she had suspected it before she’d even gone to Norway. To say that it wasn’t easy would probably be the understatement of the century. She would turn around and expect him to stand somewhere nearby, she would begin to ask him something, she would reach for a hand that wasn’t there. She had allowed herself one night to break down, to shed the tears she hadn’t cried in front of her family, and when she woke up she felt more or less ready to face her new life.

During the first few weeks since she had ended up in this universe, before they had gone to Norway, she had somehow managed to keep under the radar. Not even a couple of shopping trips with her mum had changed that. But soon the press would realise that she was news, as Pete had put it, and then hell would break loose. Pete was right, they needed a plan, but pretending that she was the long lost daughter of the alternate Jacqueline and Peter Tyler was just weird.

“I mean, I don’t want any of this,” she added. Her gesture indicated that she not only meant the Tyler Mansion. “With my Torchwood salary I can afford a small flat in London, well, if I find a flatmate. Sarah from accounting said she was looking for one. It would make everything much easier, you know that.”

“Jackie is your mum, Rose, and we’re not going to say otherwise,” Pete said. “And the press will eventually figure out that Jackie and you are much closer than you should be for you being her second cousin once removed, or whatever you were thinking of.”

“But the whole story doesn’t even make sense, Pete. Why would anyone in their right mind believe that a doctor at the hospital kidnapped me and told you I was dead when there aren’t even photos of Jackie being pregnant? And that you didn’t have a look at the body because you were too grief-stricken to bear it?” she said. “Let alone the part where you find me by complete chance, because you needed a blood transfusion and I was the only person whose blood group fit. That’s worse than EastEnders!”

Pete looked at her in confusion. “What’s EastEnders?”

Rose grinned suddenly. “A soap. On the telly. Mum scared the living daylights out of the Doctor once when she threatened him with an EastEnders marathon. Next thing I knew we were halfway to the Andromeda galaxy.”

Jackie giggled. “The look on his face...”

For the first time since she had been stranded in this universe, Rose laughed genuinely but sobered up quickly. “Still, I don’t think anybody will believe this.”

“Rose, I thought you of all people would have listened to the Doctor,” Mickey threw in, mischief
sparkling in his eyes. “I can tell you why this is going to work. Just like he said: Humans are thick!”

He grinned broadly.

Rose grinned back. “If you put it that way... This probably a tiny bit more plausible than a mass hallucination of an alien ship crashing into Big Ben.”

“And with a really good software I could probably manipulate a couple of old photos so this universe’s Jackie looks pregnant,” Mickey added. “Do you know a good hacker who could insert them into the online archives of a couple of news agencies in the correct time frame, Pete?”

“I think I might know the right person. The computer she can’t hack hasn’t been built yet. She can also get your data into all necessary government computers, Rose. Unfortunately we’ll have to change a few dates.” He considered her appearance. “You look about twenty. Nobody is going to believe that you’ve been born in 1986. I’ll tell her she should put 1989 instead.”

Rose shook her head. “I still don’t think that this ‘lost daughter’ story is a good idea. It’ll only raise questions. What if someone discovers the truth?”

“How?”

“Pete, all of us are covered in Void stuff. The Doctor discovered that with 3D glasses, for god’s sake! That’s not exactly rocket science. What if people find out that Mum, Mickey and me are from a parallel universe? The Torchwood in my universe tried to harness the energy produced by the ghost shifts, and that nearly destroyed both worlds. What do you think will happen if someone does the same here?”

Truth be told, this wasn’t the only reason why she didn’t think this would be a good idea. She also didn’t want to be reduced to being Peter Tyler’s lost daughter, forced to impersonate a society princess. That just wasn’t who she was, plain old Rose Tyler, shop girl. But most of all, it felt disloyal to the man who had died for one for her mistakes, the man who had been her dad for such a short amount of time.

“Rose, you’ve got no idea what this world is like. I promised him I would protect you, and that’s what I’m going to do. You’ll be much safer as my daughter than alone.”

Rose opened her mouth, but before she could say anything Mickey cut in, “Listen to him, Rose. I know you don’t like it, but it’s better this way, believe me. Pete’s right, this world is nothing like the one we grew up in. I never told you, but the day we crashed here, when I went to see my gran, it was like visiting a ghetto. People were being controlled when they entered or left the area. Things have improved since then, but it’s nothing like back home.”

She stared at him in shock. “But why...”

“It’s mostly the larger cities,” Pete said, disgust evident in his voice. “You wouldn’t have noticed in smaller towns or villages, or even the part of London you went for shopping. Ten years ago there was a major economic crisis and there were riots. The government was already mostly owned by Lumic at the time. They panicked and set up a zone system, to protect the Great and the Good from the force of the masses. Once the zones were in place they stayed. There have been fewer curfews, but that’s basically all that’s changed.”

His expression was stormy. Rose made a mental note to talk to him about what was going on here. He had worked with the Preachers to bring Lumic down, and she strongly suspected that he wouldn’t like the current situation either. If she was going to work for Torchwood full-time she had to know exactly what she was getting herself into and find out if there was a chance for her to help.
‘You don’t know me, Rose, not like you hopefully will one day, but believe me, this whole charade is necessary. As you said, you’re from a parallel universe, and this is my best chance to protect you. All of you.’ Pete looked at her intently.

‘Rose, please,’ Jackie begged, willing her to give in.

She nodded slowly. Having to act in public as if Rose wasn’t her daughter would only upset Jackie. She knew her mum only wanted the best for her, and although they disagreed on what that actually was, she never would hurt her like that. Besides, her mum’s acting skills had never been extremely convincing. If she let something slip someday the results might be catastrophic, for all of them.

Pete smiled at Rose. ‘I’ll have the PR department draw up a press announcement tomorrow.’

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Rose opened her eyes and remembered instantly. Today it was three months. Three months since her grip on the lever had slipped. Ninety-one days since her life had been turned upside down once more.

Of course her mum felt the need to point out the fact over breakfast. The Doctor could be annoyingly tactless on occasion, but her mum was even worse in that regard.

‘Rose, don’t you think you should finally get on with your life? It’s been three months.’

She knew exactly what Jackie was trying to tell her, and it hurt. The wound hadn’t had a chance to heal yet, and she doubted it ever really would, not even when she saw him again. Even then there would always be the fear that she was going to lose him once more, one way or the other.

In a possibly very see-through (and in hind-sight completely useless) attempt to change the topic she said, “I am getting on with my life, Mum. I’ve got a job, and I’m trying to get my A-levels. Speaking of which, I have a study group this evening, so I won’t be home for dinner.”

After having lived on the TARDIS for so long, living with her mum and Pete in the mansion was less than optimal. She had meant it when she had told Pete that she would get herself a flat. She hadn’t had much choice in the matter, though, because the paparazzi had been a real problem during the last couple of weeks. They’d even tried to interrupt one of her classes, but the school had put an end to that quickly.

Her only consolation was that the press hadn’t yet caught on her working with Torchwood. Hopefully that wouldn’t change when she finally got her A-levels and started doing field work. Dragging the press along on her missions would have her back in research faster than she could say Raxacoricofallapatorius. But first came her A-levels, and before that came said study group.

“You’re going out? Did you meet someone nice?” Jackie asked, apparently having missed everything she had said, apart from ‘won’t be home for dinner’.

Rose rolled her eyes. “Mum, it’s a study group. I’m going there to study for my exams, not to meet someone.”

“But maybe you should. Go out and have some fun, Rose. You’re just burying yourself in work. He wouldn’t have wanted that.”

The Doctor would want to break the neck of anyone who looked at her in a certain way, she thought wryly. Not that he would have actually done it, at least that’s what she hoped, but still. He’d been thinking about throwing the Walking Innuendo (his exact words) out of an airlock for a mostly
harmless comment about strawberries during breakfast the day after they had visited Cardiff, at a point when he had already considered Jack as a friend. And that had been long before they had become lovers.

She got up, put her mug in the sink and faced Jackie. “He wants me to have a fantastic life, and that’s exactly what I’m trying to have,” she told her. “Until we see each other again.”

“Love, you know what he said. You told me yourself. He won’t come,” Jackie reasoned.

“He will come,” she said with conviction. “If there is a way he will find it, even if it takes him years.”

“Rose, darling, think about it. He’s probably already found someone else to travel with. Don’t tie yourself to a man who will forget about you soon, if he hasn’t done that already.”

She took a deep breath, desperately trying not to yell at Jackie. “Mum, I really hope that he has found someone to travel with. I asked him to, for crying out loud. And he never forgets about anyone he’s ever travelled with, even if they haven’t been...” She broke off before she could say more, but it was too late.

“Oh, I knew it!” Jackie burst out. “You kept going on and on about not being like that, but you were, weren’t you? That dirty old...”

“Stop it, mum!” Rose interrupted her angrily. “You’ve got no idea what you’re talking about. We weren’t like that for a long time. But he loves me and I love him, and nothing is ever going to change that.” She knew she was getting louder but she didn’t care.

“He might have told you that he loved you, Rose, but that doesn’t mean it’s true. Most men would tell you anything to get into your knickers. Believe me, I know.”

Rose simply couldn’t stop herself any longer from leashing out. “Yeah, I clearly remember the string of men you paraded through your bedroom.”

When she saw hurt on Jackie’s face she regretted her words instantly. “I’m sorry, Mum. I really am,” she apologised and took another deep breath in an attempt to calm herself down. “Look, I know your relationship with Dad wasn’t the perfect fairy tale you told me when I was little, but I know the Doctor loves me. Even if he hadn’t finally told me on that bloody beach, I would have known anyway.”

Almost from the moment she had met him there had been something in every gaze he gave her, in the way he held her hand, his hugs. All of them said that she was the centre of his universe, and she had only begun to understand why when he had told her about the War. Gradually he had let her into every dark corner of his soul, trusting her enough to burden her with the knowledge of what he had done. Afterwards he had offered to take her home, so certain that she wouldn’t want to spend any more time in his presence. His hearts had been in his eyes then, and she had known.

“Rose, open your eyes. He probably just said the words because he knew that nothing would ever come of it. He’s in another universe, for god’s sake.” Jackie was getting louder as well. For once Rose was thankful that they weren’t back in their old flat for this particular discussion, because everyone in the entire house would have been able to hear them.

“He’d never just say the words if he didn’t mean them. And so you just know, I’d give almost anything to get back to him,” she practically yelled.

“I can see that,” Jackie grated out. “Especially ‘cos you’ve done it before. The estate wasn’t good enough for you, so you ran off with an alien! You left your family, the people who loved you, and
vanished for a whole year!”

Rose winced visibly. “And I’m still sorry for that. I didn’t mean to be gone for so long. But that’s beside the point. It wasn’t that he could show me the universe. It never was. When he took my hand in the basement of Henrik’s, I suddenly felt alive. I told you before, mum. The Doctor showed me how to live, how to make a difference. That’s why I’ve fallen in love with him. He makes people better. He made me better.”

She was unable to stop herself. The words just tumbled out, and she didn’t even know what she was going to say next. What came out was probably the worst thing she could have said at this moment.

“You keep going on about how he won’t come, that he doesn’t love me, but you’re wrong. Do you really wanna know what he told me on that beach, mum? Do you? He asked me to marry him. And I said yes.”

A ringing silence followed her words. It didn’t last long.

“He what?” Jackie screeched, in a tone that almost shredded her eardrums. Her mum’s reaction was exactly what she had imagined. Now they would be getting to the part of the conversation she had been dreading since they had left the beach.

“Asked me to marry him,” she repeated, more calmly this time.

“But he’s an alien!” Trust her mum to point out the obvious.

“Yes, he is. But I love him, and that is all that matters.”

“You’re not marrying an alien, Rose Tyler! That’s... That’s just wrong!”

“I dunno if you’ve noticed, but I’m an adult, Mum. I can make my own decisions,” she snapped.

“Oh, I’m not so sure about that. Right now you’re sounding as if you’ve been brainwashed!”

For a split-second Rose stared at her in shocked silence. “Mum! He never would... I can’t even believe you said that!”

Jackie clasped her hands over her mouth and blinked a few times. “I’m sorry, love. I didn’t mean it,” she said ruefully.

Rose avoided her eyes and nodded, not trusting her voice. For some time they were silent.

“Love, I know what you said, but think about it. You could do so much better than him,” Jackie pleaded eventually.

Rose smiled at her sadly. “You know, that’s probably the only thing you and the Doctor will ever agree about – that I could do better than him. Mum, I don’t even want you to be happy for me, but can’t you try to accept that I love him?”

“Rose, do you think I would have helped you to pull the TARDIS open if I hadn’t believed that you loved him? But I still think you’re making a mistake.”

“Mum, I already told you, he will come. I don’t care if you think I’m giving up on something if I wait for him. I know I don’t. So would you please do me a favour and let me live my life? Because if you can’t do that, then I’d better move out,” she told Jackie calmly.

With that she snatched her bag from the chair she had deposited it during breakfast and left the
It was one of those days. One of those days when everything seemed to go wrong. One of those days that had the chance to be absolutely fantastic. One of those days he would have loved to share with Rose, the shouting, the running, the danger, the laughter. Sharing it with Donna was not bad, not by far, but it was different. For instance, there was much more shouting involved, from his companion, that was, and the danger of being slapped was decidedly higher.

They had been aiming for ancient Rome, but when he exited the TARDIS he found himself in the middle of London, less than forty years after William the Conqueror had deserved his title. For a few seconds he stared at the spot where nine hundred years later he would be running across a bridge, hand in hand with Rose. Then he glared at his ship, but received only an innocent hum in response.

“So you sure this is Rome? I mean, why can I understand everything?” Donna interrupted his thoughts.

“Every other time I would say that’s because the TARDIS translates it, but in this case it’s mostly ‘cos we’re in medieval London,” he answered lightly, trying to shake off the memories for now.

“London? You took me to London? I can have London whenever I want to!” She sounded annoyed, although he couldn’t fathom why.

“Medieval London, Donna,” he gave back patiently.

“I can have that, too. Ever heard of medieval festivals?” she said stubbornly.

Medieval festivals, right. He rolled his eyes. “Donna, time travel and medieval festivals are two completely different things. Besides, you couldn’t have Westminster Abbey in Norman style and the White Tower while it was still brand new.” He grinned at her.

Donna shrugged. “Oh, in that case... Do you think they’ve got a market?”

“This is London, Donna. Of course they’ve got a market somewhere.”

“Well, we could use some milk. I don’t care if you’re content with tea that can stand on its own, I want cream.”

She had medieval London in front of her nose and she wanted to go shopping? He sighed inwardly. The things he did for companions.

Once they had reached the market Donna immediately began to browse the stalls, haggling with the vendors as if she’d been doing it all her life. She was brilliant; he had to give her that. She probably would be able to sell a fridge to a polar bear and convince him he’d made a good bargain.

One hour later he could finally see the end of the market. He estimated it would take them another quarter of an hour, but then his ordeal would be over. Unfortunately he hadn’t taken into account the universe’s perverse pleasure in torturing him.

It was the fifth before last stall that attracted his attention, and he stepped between Donna and another woman to take a closer look. There was a large assortment of jewellery on display, most of it completely worthless, but what had caught his eye was one piece in particular, a pendant that would have looked Gaelic to everyone who didn’t know what the engraved symbol represented.
When he met the vendor’s eyes they looked almost snake-like for a millisecond. He barely managed to hide his surprise. What was a Fegesdan doing in medieval London selling a pendant that shouldn’t even exist anymore? He dug through his pockets for his sonic screwdriver to examine them.

Unfortunately he had completely forgotten why he never used that particular setting. There was stuff and it went ding, which alerted the woman who was standing next to him and gossiping with one of her friends. The conclusion she reached was only to be expected, given their surroundings.

“Witchcraft!”

He had barely time to hide the sonic in one of his inner pockets before four guards appeared and tried to arrest him. He shot Donna a glance to tell her to keep out of this, but she took it as her cue to attack one of the guards.

Things went downhill from there rather quickly.

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Whatever had happened to the British judicial system in the last nine hundred years, it had certainly become a lot less efficient over time. It took the Sheriff of London less than three hours to charge them, put them on trial, sentence them and throw them into a cell in the White Tower.

It hadn’t exactly helped his case when one of the guards had discovered a golden cup in one of his pockets. It was a ceremonial goblet from Araxius Seven and he’d completely forgotten that he’d ever had it, but unfortunately it looked suspiciously like a goblet the Westminster Abbey had lost a couple of years ago, relatively speaking.

On the plus side, being charged with theft from the church was slightly better than being charged with witchcraft, mostly because it was easier to prove. Which it meant they would skip torture and sentence them to death immediately. Fortunately they hadn’t found any of the other pockets, because that would have been a real mess.

So he had ended up on the floor of a room that was completely empty, apart from a pile of straw in a corner that looked as if it had been there since William the Conqueror had finished the building. The look he received from Donna said that he deserved nothing less for landing them here. Then she turned to start banging at the door and insult the guards and their respective ancestors while he got up and leaned against the wall, still trying to figure out what a pendant that couldn’t possibly exist and a Fegesdan were doing in medieval London.

“Well, don’t you think you should do something?” Donna demanded when she had finally given up on banging against the door and play name-calling with the guards. She got surprisingly creative when it came to insults, although he could have told her that that particular strategy never worked. Neither did trying to seduce them, despite what Jack Harkness had told everybody who had been willing to listen.

He crossed his arms and grinned at her. “No need.”

His demeanour seemed to annoy her, although he couldn’t fathom why.

“No need? I dunno if you’ve noticed but they’re going to execute us tomorrow, first place in the morning!”

“Oh, that,” he said dismissively. “Do you’ve got any idea how often I’ve been sentenced to death in the last couple of years?” Make that centuries.
“You’re telling me that this has happened to you before?”

“Yep.”

“And you’re telling me that there’s no need to do something?”

“Yep.” A broad smirk accompanied the affirmative.

“Do you think this is funny?”

“A bit.”

Smack.

He rubbed his cheek. “That hurt!” And apparently he had found the only person in the entire universe whose slaps were worse than Jackie Tyler’s.

“Good.” She stood in front of him, arms crossed and said, “And now you’re gonna explain to me how you’re going to get us out of this mess!”
He rubbed his cheek. “That hurt!” And apparently he had found the only person in the entire universe whose slaps were worse than Jackie Tyler’s.

“Good.” She stood in front of him, arms crossed and said, “And now you’re gonna explain to me how you’re going to get us out of this mess!”

“Do you know what day it is, Donna?”

The non-sequitur seemed to annoy her even more. Her eyes blazed with anger. “How should I know? You’re the bloody Time Lord. I thought I would spend a day in ancient Rome, and what do I get? London and an execution.”

“Today, Donna Noble, is the evening of 2 February, 1101.”

“And what’s that got to do with the price of tea?”

He grinned. “In a couple of hours Ranulf Flambard, the first ever prisoner of the Tower, will escape through his window, using a rope smuggled into his cell in a flagon of wine.”

“And what exactly is your point?” She spat out every word.

“Guess, where his cell is?” He pointed at the ceiling, still grinning.

She stared at the ceiling, at him, at the small window that allowed them an unimpeded view over the Thames and back at him again. Then she asked incredulously, “You want me to climb out of that window and more than sixty feet to the ground, on a rope that we’ll have to catch first before we can use it? Are you insane?”

“Well, the bishop survived it,” he pointed out reasonably.

Unfortunately the point was completely lost to Donna.

“I am not climbing out of that window!” she snapped, sounding suspiciously like Jackie Tyler. Again.

“You can always stay here and try your luck with the hangman on the Tower Green. It’s your execution,” he told her with a smirk.

For nearly ten seconds Donna was absolutely speechless. “You... you... Time Lord!” The last two syllables came out like they were the worst offense she could think of.

“That’s me!” he grinned, unfazed. “Well, you also could have tried to seduce the guards, if you’d been less creative with the name-calling.” He paused briefly, still a smirk on his face. “Not that it would have worked.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” She narrowed her eyes, and he could almost physically feel another Oncoming Slap.

“It almost never does. Unless it’s a more or less elaborate trap.” He should know. He had statistical evidence.
Donna glared at him, but relented eventually. “And what do we do now?”

“We wait.”

“What for?”

“The delivery of the flagon and the guards getting drunk. And I really would appreciate if you could shut up for a bit while I try to figure out what a Fegesdan is doing in medieval London.” Once again he wished that he had kept his mouth shut. Fortunately Donna was neither a Basilisk nor Medusa, otherwise he would have either dropped dead or turned to stone at her gaze.

~o~o~o~

Drinking songs were the same all over the universe. Fun while being drunk, downright annoying while being completely sober. Being imprisoned tended to make things worse, since one lacked the opportunity to change one’s location. By the fourth time the guards repeated what must have been a medieval version of ‘Seven Drunken Nights’ the Doctor was seriously considering to throw overboard what was still left of his sanity and give utter madness a try.

Donna on the other hand was fast asleep, exhausted from more banging against the door and glaring at him. Her head was leaning against his shoulder, and she was snoring softly, although for the sake of his wellbeing he would never tell her. Once or twice he had caught himself looking at the dead weight resting against his shoulder, expecting to see blonde hair, to hear the soft noises Rose made while she was sleeping. Then he would remember and go back to staring at the opposite wall, thinking about the numerous times he had watched Rose in her sleep, missing the feeling of her warm hand unconsciously reaching for his.

Half an hour later the drinking songs eventually died down, not one second too early, because insanity had been looking like a more inviting option with every repetition of that infernal song. He got up, steadying Donna’s body to prevent her from gliding down the wall. Time to leave their present accommodations for good – or at least until the next time he ended up in the Tower.

“Donna?” he said, touching her shoulder.

She slowly opened her eyes and looked at him through bleary eyes. “Hmmm?”

“Are you up for a bit of abseiling or do you still wanna try your luck with the executioner?” he asked cheerfully and held out his hand to help her up.

Despite the huge yawn she tried to cover with her hand she still managed to glare at him murderously. He sighed inwardly. Getting her imprisoned couldn’t have been that bad, not even for a first trip, could it?

He suppressed a sigh and set about to explain how exactly this escape was going to happen.

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It took him more than two minutes to wriggle through the small window, mostly because he refused to shed his leather jacket during the process. Three minutes later he reached the end of the rope and dropped down the last five feet. Admittedly his night sight was much better than a human’s, so he was fairly certain that it would take Donna at least twice the time.

“Now, Donna,” he hissed, looking up to discern her figure against the dark walls of the building. “Like I said, one foot after another. No need to hurry.”
If only it was true. Given his track record they’d run into a couple of guards before this was over. He adjusted his position slightly, so he was standing directly under her, focussing on her descent.

“Don’t you dare stare at me! My knickers are none of your business,” she yelled down.

He really should have explained the whole ‘escaping’ thing better, he thought. If she continued to make herself clear in that volume, they’d be discovered before she’d have even reached the ground and end up in that prison cell again. He had the dim feeling she wouldn’t like that either.

“One, I’m not interested in your knickers, two, either I’ll make an attempt at catching you if you fall, or I’ll stop looking up. Your choice. And for god’s sake, shut up,” he hissed.

“Oi! Don’t talk to me like that!”

“If you two could stop your bickering for the time being, I’m trying to escape here,” a sarcastic voice made itself known. Judging by the sound the man was hiding in the bushes that covered the foot of the building.

“Who’s that?” Donna demanded to know.

“That, Donna, is His Excellency, the Bishop of Durham. And he definitely has got a point, so be quiet.”

Apparantely the presence of the bishop was enough to grant them heavenly interference, because a miracle happened: Donna kept silent until she reached the ground, panting heavily.

The Doctor turned to the bishop. “I don’t suppose you could give us a lift to the other side of the river, Your Excellency?” he asked lightly.

“How do you know that I’m waiting for a boat?” the man asked, sounding surprised.

The Time Lord leant against the wall. “Well, the southern wall is least guarded because it’s protected by the river, so it’s an obvious escape route.”

“And why would I help two criminals to escape from their just punishment?”

“Oi! We didn’t do anything!” Donna protested. The bishop looked at her in astonishment, apparently having completely forgotten her presence.

“Donna, what did I say about being quiet while escaping?” the Doctor said. “Although she’s got a point. It was a misunderstanding.”

“You’d say that when you were guilty, too.”

“Yes, we would,” the Doctor conceded with a smile. “But if we were guilty, do you really think refusing to help us would stop us?”

“I guess not,” Ranulf Flambard gave back.

The Doctor grinned. “Then what are we waiting for?”

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They had to wait a couple of minutes for the signal, then they left the shadows and dashed across the open space towards the southern wall. After sneaking up on the guard’s walk they discovered that their boat was already waiting for them, hidden in the shadows. One of the crewmen threw up a rope
which the Doctor caught and fastened to a battlement.

Ten minutes later, after yet another abseil, they crossed the Thames. They landed slightly down the river, and from their position Donna could see the tower of a smaller church standing where once Southwark Cathedral would be. After saying goodbye to the bishop, she followed the Doctor into the maze of small streets that was Southwark until he eventually stopped.

“And what do we do now?” Donna asked and leant against a wall, thoroughly exhausted. If she never had to see a prison cell again, let alone abseil in any way, shape or form, she’d count herself lucky. The Doctor on the other hand looked as if he’d only been for a walk, although he’d helped with the rowing.

“We ask the Fegesdan what he’s doing in a timeframe he doesn’t belong to and offer him a ticket home.”

“We ask?” She stared at him incredulously.

“Basic form of communication among most non-telepathic species. It’s been known to work,” he replied sarcastically. “Sometimes you even get useful answers. And I really don’t make a habit out of hitting people over their heads in dark alleys so I can read their minds without them making a fuss. Too complicated.”

“You can read minds? Oh my god, did you read mine?” She’d kill him if he had, alien or not, having saved her life from that spider or not.

“Why would I want to do that? You never stop talking as it is; I really don’t need to read your thoughts on top of that. Besides, trying to read a human mind needs a lot of concentration, ‘cos you lot have got the attention span of an excited cocker spaniel. Humans! How do you manage with your funny little brains? Trying to read them constantly would be the direct route into madness, and I can manage that on my own, thanks.”

Excited cocker spaniel! If she wasn’t so exhausted, he’d get another slap for that. Sometimes she really wondered why anyone would want put up with that sort of behaviour, but then he did something incredible or smiled one of those rare smiles that lit up his entire being. In those moments she could understand why someone would fall in love with him.

She sighed. “Right. So we visit that alien. Do you’ve got any idea where to find him?”

“Nope.”

“Let me guess: We’ll ask for him as well?”

He wouldn’t really do that, would he? Because in that case she would definitely kill him. She wasn’t certain that exhaustion counted as a valid excuse for self-defence, but right now she was more than willing to take the risk. She wanted a shower and a bed, although not necessarily in that order, and if he forced her to knock on every bloody door in this town until they found the alien she would not be responsible for her actions.

“Nah. Just this once, Donna Noble, I’m gonna scan for alien tech.” He grinned at her.

She couldn’t help herself. She grinned back.

~o~o~o~

They wandered through the dark streets, the Doctor occasionally pointing his sonic screwdriver in
various directions and mumbling something completely indistinguishable. Eventually Donna reached a point where all she wanted was to curl down somewhere and sleep.

“Can’t we wait until tomorrow to find him?” she asked, trying to suppress a yawn.

“Probably. But he doesn’t belong in this time frame, let alone this planet, and with every day he stays it’s more likely that he’ll change history somehow. And believe me, whenever that happens it turns into a disaster sooner or later. Usually sooner.” He paused for a moment. “I’ll offer to take him home, but I need you to play along. The Fegesdan are a trader race, and they don’t respect anybody who doesn’t live according to their rules.”

“What do you mean?”

“I normally wouldn’t do this, but he’d be offended if I didn’t haggle with him. And you really don’t wanna know what the result would be. Let’s just say, he’s got sharp teeth for a reason. I need you to get the price down without making it look suspicious.” He grinned at her. “Just think of it as playing ‘good cop – bad cop’, just with bargaining.”

Another thirty minutes later the Doctor stopped in front of a nondescript house and knocked on the door, using some sort of rhythm. There was absolutely nothing to distinguish it from its neighbours, nothing to indicate that an alien was living here. The thought gave Donna the creeps. How many of them were there in her time, going about their business without people even knowing they were among them?

The Doctor knocked a second time, and this time Donna could hear something moving in the house. Eventually the door opened and revealed a man who seemed to be in his fifties, wearing contemporary clothes. He said something that almost sounded like a hissing and the Doctor answered with a similar sound. Then suddenly she could understand everything again.

“I take it you’re not here for business,” the man said, shooting her a glance.

“Depends on your point of view,” the Doctor gave back. “But I don’t think you want to discuss this on the street, do you? I’m the Doctor by the way, and this is Donna.” He looked questioningly at the man in front of him.

“Tauslir Clan Cigisd.” He bowed slightly, then stepped back and the Doctor entered the building. Donna followed, stopping briefly at the threshold. Inside the presence of electronic bits and bobs that covered every available surface gave away that this was nothing but a contemporary house.

“Your main tachyon drive?” the Doctor asked.

Tauslir nodded. “I don’t know what happened. I was on a journey to Talaxir Seven when I got hit by a shock wave. It didn’t even show up on my instruments. Next thing that happened was the gravity of this planet pulling me in. All I could do was land my ship safely, but it destroyed my engines.”

He gestured awkwardly with his arm. Although he had appeared human, on closer look it seemed as if he had two elbows and his eyes looked almost snakelike. Donna hadn’t noticed this back at the market.

“This may seem like a stupid question, but when did your ship get hit by that wave?” the Doctor questioned.

“15 Hubab.”

“And which year?” The Doctor tried to hide it, but there was a note of impatience in his voice.
“It is the seventeenth year of the reign of Colvis Clan Teregsd. Where are you from that you don’t know that?”

The Doctor’s shoulders slumped briefly, as if this had been an answer he’d been dreading. Then he straightened and looked at the alien.

“I can offer you a passage home.” He paused deliberately. “Against adequate payment, of course.”

“Doctor!” Donna hissed.

He ignored her and gave the Fegesdan a disinterested glance.

“What do you want?”

“Three quarters of the jewellery you didn’t sell yesterday.”

“Unacceptable.”

“Half. And only because I was in such a good mood when I got up this morning.”

“That’s armed robbery! I wouldn’t even be able to pay my bills when I get home.”

The Doctor shrugged nonchalantly. “Well, you can always stay here. The next few decades are a bit boring, but with a bit of luck you’ll get to see The Anarchy.” He turned to her. “Let’s go. He’s obviously not interested.”

“But, Doctor, you can’t just leave him here!” Donna exclaimed and threw her hands up in the air theatrically. “He’ll never see his home again!”

Out of the corner of her eye she could see the Doctor shaking his head infinitesimally. Maybe less hand-waving?

“Not my problem,” the Doctor said. “He doesn’t want to pay the price, he doesn’t get a passage. Simple as that.”

“Doctor, imagine if you could never see your planet again!” She wrung her hands, and the Doctor winced slightly. Still too much acting? “Couldn’t you go down with your price? Just a bit more.”

The Doctor glared at her, then turned back to the Fegesdan, rolled his eyes and shrugged. “Women. No business sense and too much heart. One third of your jewellery. And I get to choose which.”

“One piece. And I decide which.”

The Doctor raised an eyebrow. “Do you take me for an idiot? Do you really think you can fob me off with junk? I get to choose one quarter of your stuff, or you can spend the next couple of decades in a time period without indoor plumbing and risk being burnt on a stick if someone discovers that you’re not human. And without your cloaking device that’s decidedly more likely than not. I’d have to shut down your electronics, you see. Can’t have that lying around in this time period. Would cause all sorts of paradoxes.”

“Doctor!” she exclaimed, sounding shocked. He wouldn’t really do that, would he?

The alien slowly closed his inner pair of eyelids, hiding his snakelike eyes, then opened them again. “A tenth. And you can choose one piece.”

“Done.”
The Doctor closed the door behind them, shutting the noise of Fegesd out and sent them into the Time Vortex.

“Prison break, easy. One person safely returned to his correct timeline and for once no alien plot to change history or take over the planet, even better.” He grinned at Donna. “Not sure how that happened, ‘cos this is London after all, but who am I to complain?”

It had been a long time since he last had had a day like this, without the world almost ending, a day where everybody lived. Rose being here to see it would have been the one thing that would have made it truly fantastic.

In the end, the pendant was the only thing he had taken as fare. For him, it had been the only piece of value anyway, although some of the others had been worth much more. Normally he wouldn’t even have considered using a trip in the TARDIS as bargain, but this had allowed the Fegesdan to keep up appearances.

He ran his fingers gently over the contours of the pendant, feeling every scratch and every mark that dented the metal. The stone that was set in the middle of the tiny piece of jewellery looked almost like amber, and it seemed to change its colour depending on how the light fell on it, sometimes to a dark brown, sometimes to gold. It told stories of a life, of having been worn with pride. It wasn’t perfect, but that was part of its beauty.

“What is it?” Donna asked. “Is it dangerous? Is that the reason why you wanted it?”

“No. It’s not dangerous. It’s a very old pendant,” he said softly. “Something my people gave to their beloved ones, back in the time when they still bonded out of love and not out of political interest. The legends said that young men went looking for gemstones that matched the eye colour of the woman they loved, and they wouldn’t come back until they found the perfect stone.”

He trailed off, still staring the little piece of jewellery in his hand, still unable to believe that it even existed. It should have been impossible. Everything connected to Gallifrey had been removed from the timelines when he had used the Moment, but not only did this pendant exist, it looked as if it had been designed for Rose. Maybe it had fallen through time, like that Dalek in Utah, and somehow the Fegesdan had gotten hold of it. He doubted that he’d ever find out.

He ran his thumb over the locket once more, the motion almost a caress. Then he slipped it into one of his pockets and turned back to his companion, his hand hovering over the controls. “So, Donna Noble, where to next?”

She stared at him as if he had lost his mind. “Bed. And if you disturb me during the next twelve hours, the slap you got in the Tower will seem like a light summer breeze to you. So no waking, not even if the world is ending.” With that she turned on her heel and left the room.

The Doctor just stared at her retreating back. And they called him the Oncoming Storm?
perfect dress, the perfect shoes and the perfect accessories. Three years ago she probably would have
loved it, nowadays she simply wanted to pick a fitting dress, reasonable shoes, preferably a pair that
would allow her to run for her life, and be done with it. Although she had to admit that the TARDIS
wardrobe room might have spoiled her in that regard.

If she was honest she hadn’t even minded the shopping or the dressing up, although she would have
had much more fun if there had been a chance of the Doctor getting her out of the dress afterwards.
No, what drove her up the walls was her mum telling her what a wonderful opportunity this was to
get on with her life, despite the discussion they’d had about that specific topic a couple of weeks ago.

Rose stood in front of her mirror, examining the fall of the dress. The dark blue satin gown had an
empire waist that was embroidered with tiny golden flowers. It was held up by thin straps and fell to
her knees. Compared to the latest fashion in this universe it was positively chaste, despite the low
neckline. It had taken her some time, but eventually she had discovered matching shoes and a light
silk shawl in exactly the same shade of blue. It reminded her of the TARDIS.

If she closed her eyes she could almost imagine the Doctor standing behind her, observing her in the
mirror. His cool fingers would glide over her shoulders until they reached the straps of her dress and
straighten them. Then they would wander further along her collarbone to the thin gold chain that held
her TARDIS key, the only jewellery she had decided to wear, to show the world who she belonged
to. He would follow the chain until he reached the soft curve of her breasts, his fingers ghosting over
her skin but not quite touching her.

He would whisper dark promises in her ear, telling her what he wanted to do to her, how jealous he
was of every man who saw her in that dress and how wonderful it would look on the floor of their
bedroom. Then he would run his thumbs over her nipples and circle them lightly, until she wished he
would really touch her body. But he would simply step back and hold out his arm for her like a
gentleman while she would almost groan with frustration, burning for him. She would spend the
entire evening teasing him in every way she could possibly imagine, until…

A knock on the door shattered the fantasy.

“Are you ready, darling?” her mum’s voice said.

Rose took a deep breath, grabbed shawl and purse, and went to face the hyenas.

~o~o~o~

Rose had refused any suggestion to make a grand entrance, and simply appeared among the guests. It
took her less than half an hour to decide that staying away from this event would have been wiser.
Although she had expected that her first appearance in society would be the topic of conversation, it
was overwhelming.

She usually didn’t mind crowds, and normally she loved parties, no matter where and when in the
universe, but this was getting to her rather quickly. The hyena comparison wasn’t far from reality.
Everyone was staring at her, pointing and whispering when they thought she was looking elsewhere.
She had met alien species that were considered as the proverbial example of rudeness in their
respective galaxy who behaved more politely than the people who thought of themselves as ‘high
society’.

But she was Dame Rose Tyler, at least in her original universe, and she had seen and done more
incredible things than most of them could ever imagine. She straightened her back, gathered her
courage and decided to have fun.
Her mum seemed to love it. But then she was the Jaqueline Tyler, not some long lost daughter the paparazzi had declared as their prey of the year. Her mum just had to pretend that she had suffered severe memory loss during the Cybermen attack and was only recovering slowly. When Pete had come up with that explanation Rose had had to suppress a grin, because she had been imagining what the Doctor would have to say on the topic. Probably something along the lines of, “Wished she’d lost it in the first place,” or, “No big difference.”

Rose still wondered that people actually believed her cover story. The whole tale was so see-through that one could read the small print of an insurance policy through it. Let alone that it had led to a couple of completely unexpected problems. Try to make up a plausible lie about your past when you didn’t know anything about the country you lived in. This was still Britain, true, but things were different here, had been for centuries.

She let her eyes sweep over the crowd until she discovered Mickey and Jake near the bar. Two friendly faces where she didn’t have to pretend. Not much, anyway. She was already halfway there when Jackie stopped her.

“Rose? May I introduce Jason Avery? His father is the CEO of Obsidian Ltd.”

Jason was tall and blonde with green eyes, wearing a suit that screamed money. But despite his outward appearance, his expression told her that she was in severe danger of dying of boredom if she spent more than half an hour in his presence.

“I’m pleased to meet you, Rose,” the young man said politely, taking her hand and shaking it lightly.

_Run for your life_. The words popped into her mind unbidden and her heart clenched at the memory. It wasn’t the first time someone had said that he was pleased to meet her, not by far, and most of the time the words didn’t trigger that reaction. But this time it was different somehow. She knew exactly what her mum was going to do, and it hurt that Jackie didn’t seem to be able to follow her request and leave her alone.

With a polite smile she began to make small talk, although even that was a problem. Talking about the weather could lead only so far. And ‘Hello, nice to meet you, what do you think about parallel universes and aliens?’ would have her in a padded cell rather quickly. Talking about travel on Earth would lead to the conclusion that she was probably even more empty-headed than any society princess in her universe she could think of, since she might mention countries that didn’t even exist here. Gingerbread house was the wrong expression, bloody maze would be much more accurate, she thought wryly.

Eventually Jason suggested the garden and she agreed, deeming the rare flowers this universe’s Jackie Tyler had let her gardeners plant there a safer subject for further conversation than anything else she could think of. Besides, the mansion was still giving her the creeps, especially with all those guests around, despite the changes Pete had made. Every time she looked at a window she expected a metal arm breaking glass.

She still had the urge to run, but forced herself to stay. She had promised herself that she would have a fantastic life, and she was fairly certain that the Doctor wouldn’t want her to bury herself in work instead of living. Although he would be marvellously jealous if he could see her talking to Jason. She could almost hear his snarky comments about her penchant for pretty boys.

Rose followed him outside. The garden was lit with white lampions that illuminated the paths, the air heavy with the scents of various flowers. It was devastatingly romantic, and she would have given anything to share the moment with the Doctor instead of a high society idiot. Although, knowing the Doctor she’d probably running through the garden instead of walking, either in pursuit of something
or running for her life.

Jason stopped under a tree and turned to her. “So, Rose, what does a beautiful flower like you do when you don’t adorn society events with your presence?”

Had he really said that? The only person she had ever known who could have delivered that line more or less successfully was Jack Harkness, and the pretty boy in front of her certainly wasn’t him. “Oh, you know, work for my father,” she answered evasively, her mind preoccupied with coming up with a believable excuse to get rid of him.

“Work?” The way he repeated the word sounded like he was forced to think about something distasteful. “What about having some fun?”

The way he leered at her told her what he was referring to. She shuddered inwardly. “With you?” She raised an eyebrow. “I’d rather cuddle with a Cyberman.”

“Come on, Rose. You certainly won’t regret it.” He smirked at her and produced a small metal box. “You need something to relax.”

“No.” Her voice was like ice.

Suddenly he was pressing her against the tree and tried to kiss her. She moved her head to avoid him and wriggled a bit to adjust her position, then looked at him. “What letter of the word ‘no’ did you not understand? All those drugs fried your brain, or what?” she asked scathingly. It took more than a bit of groping to intimidate a girl who had grown up on a council estate and dissolved the Dalek Emperor into atoms.

Jason took half a step back, but didn’t let her go. “Stupid bitch! You should count yourself lucky that you got out of your zone. Nobody insults me without paying for it,” he sneered at her.

“Oh, really?” She raised an eyebrow, her fingers already touching a pressure point Jack had shown her once. It had already come in handy a couple of times, but she would never have thought that she would have to use it at a party. “And how are you gonna make me if I do this?” She pressed and he broke down to his knees, yelping in pain.

“You’re insane!”

She ignored the comment. “You can count yourself lucky that I’m in a forgiving mood. But if you do that ever again I’ll cut your balls and feed them to the kois in the pond. Although I’m not entirely convinced that the poor fish would survive it. And that would be a pity, don’t you think?” She gave him a smile that was so sweet it hurt.

Jason winced.

“And I suggest you prepare a couple of believable excuses for the next, oh, three hundred Vitex parties.” Without another word Rose turned back to the mansion. She held her head high and her shoulders straight, desperately trying not to run. She felt sick. She had known this would happen. Probably not exactly like this, she certainly hadn’t expected to be propositioned by one of the pretty society boys, but people treating her like she was nothing more than an object labelled as ‘Vitex heiress’ was what she had feared.

It was humiliating. It was like being a shop girl again, just with fancier clothes. Everybody had just seen a girl from the estates who could count herself lucky that she was folding jumpers and trousers in a shop in the city instead of working in a chippy or at the butcher’s, until the evening the Doctor had blown up her job. Now everybody was just seeing an empty-headed society princess and Pete’s
money.

She entered the house, determined to leave the party instantly. In the main hall she was stopped by Jackie who had been talking to the Mayor of London.

“Where are you going?” she asked, sounding genuinely curious.

Rose could have exploded, but somehow stopped herself from yelling at her. Sometimes Jackie’s timing was even worse than the Doctor’s. “Do that never again,” she hissed at her mum, then she left the room.

~o~o~o~

“You’re gonna freeze to death, Rose,” Jake said from behind, draping his jacket around her shoulders.

“Thanks.” She stared into the dark landscape, watching the reflections of the streetlamps in the waves of the small river, then gazed at the stars above her. “That’s Orion’s belt,” she said eventually, pointing. “The left star, Alnitak, has got a planet which is inhabited by blue humanoids. I met one on my very first trip with the Doctor. She was a plumber, of all things.” She fell silent, lost in memories.

“You miss him,” he stated. It wasn’t a question.

It took her some time to answer. “More than I can tell. You miss Rickey, don’t you?”

He nodded. “Mickey is my friend, but seeing him... Sometimes it makes things worse.”

They fell silent for awhile.

Eventually Rose turned to him, a tiny smile on her face. “Care for a pint? I think the patrons in the village pub will be much better company than the hyenas in there.” She gestured at the mansion.

Jake grinned. “I thought you’d never ask.”
Wings of Gold - Part I

Chapter Summary

Two hearts so in love, two minds so in tune that not even the void can keep them apart.

Chapter Notes

Here be smut. If dominant! Nine and wall sex is not your thing, you should probably stop reading after the three asterisks. Everyone else, enjoy! :)

This chapter and the two following chapters were posted as "Wings of Gold" to Teaspoon and ff.net, but I decided to integrate them here, because this way later chapters will make much more sense.

Wings of Gold - Part I

Divided by what some people referred to as the Void, others as Hell or The Howling, two people dreamed.

~o~o~o~

Rose Tyler stood on a crowded street in London, observing two very familiar persons. “I want chips,” a blonde girl said, and a tall man in a black leather jacket smiled. “Me, too.”

“That was the moment I began to fall in love with you,” a dark voice with a Mancunian accent whispered in her ear. She could feel his breath grazing her skin, his arms around her, holding her close. She leant back into the embrace and watched their younger selves on their way to Rose’s favourite chippy. She was silent for a long time.

“I don’t remember the exact moment,” she admitted eventually. “It started sometime between the moment you told me you could feel the turn of the Earth and ‘I could save the world but lose you’.” She turned in his arms and faced him. “But I knew that I loved you, that I was in love with you, when the reaper took you.” She ghosted a kiss over his lips and blinked.

~o~o~o~

They were sitting on a rock in the highlands, Rose next to him, their feet dangling in the air. At some distance they could see two people coming nearer. They looked as if they were having a brilliant time, joking and laughing at Queen Victoria’s expense. The Doctor wondered if they had been as happy then as he was now. What was happening at the moment proved something to be true he had wished for but hadn’t dared to believe.

She stood on a windswept beach, utterly oblivious to the elements, only concerned about him.
“Promise me that you’ll find someone to travel with. Promise me.”

“Oh, Rose.” He didn’t care if his desperation showed. He still wondered why she had chosen him, the killer of his own kind. She could have done so much better. But he had given her his hearts and just this once he wouldn’t be a coward. She didn’t deserve anything less than the truth. And so he told her, with as much conviction as he could muster. “I love you. You are my life and my soul. You saved my life in more ways than you can imagine. This is not goodbye. We’re gonna see each other again. Will you bond with me?”

“But...”

“We’re gonna see each other again,” he repeated, willing her to believe him. “I know it. Y... someone told me, eighteen months ago. I love you. Will you bond with me?”

Rose wiped her eyes. “I...”

She had agreed, even though she hadn’t been able to finish her sentence, and now the first tendrils of the bond were slowly forming. Although the Void separated them physically it could not constrain their minds. If they were very, very lucky they might be able to share a few more moments like this.

“You still owe me ten quid,” Rose said, apropos of nothing, interrupting his musings.

“No money,” he said with a smirk.

“Still a cheap date, then,” she grinned back.

“But you love me anyway.”

“That I do,” she replied, pecking him on the lips.

“Let me see if I can make it up to you,” he said. He took her hands. “Close your eyes.” She obliged and he concentrated for a moment. “And now open them again.”

~o~o~o~

She was aboard a small sailing boat, barely big enough for the two of them, gliding over a windswept ocean. In front of her was a building set on stilts, circled by seagulls. The Doctor swiftly hauled in the sails and their momentum slowed down. They docked directly under the ladder that led to the platform and the building.

“Dame Rose?” he asked and took her hand.

“Sir Doctor.” She got up and curtsied. For the first time she noticed that she was wearing a black dress held up by thin straps, with a skirt that ended about six inches above her knees and a small velvet bow at the waist. “Probably not the best choice of clothes to climb a ladder,” she noted.

“But at least you are wearing sensible shoes,” he gave back with a merry twinkle in his eyes.

A quick glance at her feet told Rose that he was right. She was wearing deck shoes.

“And since when exactly do you know how to sail?” she asked, probably sounding a bit disbelievingly.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?”

“Well, your piloting skills could definitely use some brushing up. Good thing you’re better at sailing
or we might be repeating the voyage of the Golden Hind right now,” she grinned. “Which reminds me: Where are we?”

He positioned himself under her, holding the ladder stringers. “Brighton. The planet, not the city. There are several of these pavilions built directly at the rim of the continental shelf, about three miles from the shore and about two miles from each other. People rent them for honeymoons or lazy summer holidays. We’re completely alone here.” His voice was like silk and sent shivers down her spine.

He didn’t even touch her, although the hem of her skirt grazed the arms of his leather jacket while she climbed the ladder, but she could almost physically feel his gaze and the thought of what was to come did strange things to her insides. She glanced down over her shoulder, the mild breeze blowing long strands of her hair in her face. He looked like the cat that was about to get the cream. Well, that game could be played by two, she decided.

“Don’t tell me you actually made a reservation,” she said drily, while she tucked a few of the errant strands behind her ear. Not that they would stay there for long.

The Doctor blinked twice before he managed to answer her question. At least she wasn’t the only person around that was slightly distracted. “Not even the President of the Second Great and Bountiful Human Empire could come to Brighton without a reservation. And this...” He paused, taking her in, then continued, his voice like silk, “This is just for us.”

Eventually Rose reached the platform and heard the Doctor climb the ladder. She bent down, opened the laces of her deck shoes and removed them. With impeccable timing she straightened just as he arrived at the platform, giving him an unimpeded view of her bum. A sharp intake of breath told her that he liked what he saw.

She could feel every little unevenness in the warm, wooden planks under her bare feet when she turned around to face him. With two long steps he stood in front of her, cupped her face with his large hands and kissed her leisurely, as if he had all the time in the entire universe. He explored her mouth thoroughly and she melted against him. She’d almost forgotten how easily he could turn her into jelly. Her left arm slid under the hem of his jumper of its own volition, caressing the smooth muscles on his back, while she slung the right around his neck to steady herself.

After some time she drew away to catch her breath and discovered that since the moment they had started kissing their surroundings had changed. The sight took her breath away. “Oh, that’s gorgeous!”

At her exclamation the Doctor turned and took her hand.

The sun was about to set, the fiery ball only just touching the horizon. The ocean reflected the light in myriads of shades ranging from gold to crimson and the white walls of the pavilion looked almost pink, while the blue of the sky had been completely replaced with vivid orange. For the first time this planet looked truly alien.

“It was called Gallifrey, my planet,” a voice she barely recognised said next to her. “It was beautiful. The Shining World of the Seven Systems, they called it. The Citadel of the Time Lords stood in the Mountains of Solace and Solitude, protected by a mighty glass dome that mirrored the twin suns and the burnt orange sky. The mountains were covered by large forests of trees with silvery leaves. When the second sun rose in the south and they reflected the light they looked like they were on fire, and when a breeze blew through the branches you could almost imagine they were singing. It was like the sound of time, the sound of the always changing forever.”
They stood transfixed until the sun vanished and the orange slowly turned dark blue and then black, all the time holding hands.

~o~o~o~

“Let’s go inside,” the Doctor suggested eventually. He led her to the other side of the building and opened the door.

Rose took three steps into the pavilion and took in her surroundings while the Doctor quickly lit the bundle of kindling wood in the fireplace. In the middle of the room a table was set for two persons, with exquisite china, crystal glasses, silver cutlery and white candles.

“A proper dinner? Like, a date?” she asked, sounding only somewhat incredulous.

“Well, I said I’d make it up to you, didn’t I?” He lit the candles on the table and returned to her.

“At least there aren’t any roses on the table,” she said with a cheeky smile. “That would have been too much cliché.”

“Are you saying this is domestic, Rose Tyler?” He sounded as if he was mortally offended, but for all his grumbling about domestics she knew he secretly craved them. He would never decorate the TARDIS galley with a ‘Home, Sweet Home’ embroidery or buy her a Christmas present, and the only jewellery he’d ever given her was the thin gold chain for her TARDIS key, but she had seen the relaxed look on his face when he argued with Mickey about football and the feeling of contentment he tried to hide whenever he took her to an alien bazaar so she could go shopping. Hell, he even put up with her mum for her, but seeing this was just... She didn’t even have the words.

She desperately wanted to hug him, but opted for teasing instead, her tongue poking through her teeth. “Maybe a bit.”

He laughed and pecked her on the nose. “Oh, I love you.”

She slung her arms around his waist and looked him in the eyes. “I love you, too.” Then she reached up and pulled him down for a languid kiss.

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After a bit of nibbling at his lower lip he opened his mouth and her tongue glided inside, slowly caressing his, seeking out every corner of his mouth. After a while he moved the kiss to her mouth, sliding against her tongue, stroking it with increasing passion. He ran his tongue along her teeth and over the roof of her mouth, only to resume its previous dance with hers. She sighed against him and he pulled her closer, his growing desire evident against her hip.

Eventually he pulled away to let her catch her breath and stared at her with a hunger in his eyes that had absolutely nothing to do with food and everything with her feeling like prey under the scrutiny of a falcon. Never one to step back from a challenge, she met his gaze evenly, letting her own desire for him show.

His lips crashed down on hers and with three large steps he walked her back to the door, kicking it shut in the process, and pinned her against the wood, all the time kissing her as if he would drown if he had to let her go. She could feel her knickers getting damper by the second. She wiggled a bit until she managed to get her arm between their bodies and stroked him through his jeans. He groaned.

With what looked like a great effort of will he finally stepped back. If she’d been a block of
chocolate she would have been molten under the intensity of his gaze. “I’d love to take you right here, Rose, against the door, your dress pulled up to your waist, your legs around me. I wouldn’t even bother to remove your knickers.”

More heat pooled in her belly and she could feel a twinge of anticipation between her legs. She was already ridiculously wet.

Apparently not oblivious to what he was doing to her the Doctor resumed his verbal torment. “Oh, I know you’re ready for me, Rose, I can smell it.” He smirked and continued, “I’d enter you and set a rhythm, agonisingly slow, and drive into you until you forgot your own name. You’d whimper and beg that I let you come.” A soft moan escaped her and he chuckled. “But I’d deny you release, Rose. I’d suck at your pulse point until I’d leave a mark to tell everybody that you belong to me, that you’re mine, and even then I’d never stop pounding into you.” His tone was indescribably sensuous.

Rose swallowed hard. She’d almost forgotten to breathe. If he kept this up he would manage to talk her into orgasm. Her knickers were completely drenched and all he had done was kiss her senseless and tell her what he would like to do to her. She slowly moved her hand, desperate to lift her skirt, to touch herself, not caring that he was staring at her. She needed some friction against her throbbing clit.

With a swift move the Doctor stopped her and held her hands over her head in a vicelike grip, his body nearly covering hers, his erection pressing into her stomach. He definitely wasn’t unaffected by the tension lingering between them. “No. You’re not touching yourself until I say so.”

She felt like a butterfly pinned on a corkboard and nodded slowly, the commanding tone of his voice an incredible turn on. If he toyed with her like that much longer she would probably incinerate.

He released her arms and stepped back once again, giving her one of those looks that made her feel like a goddess and a newborn kitten at the same time.

She met his gaze and decided that turnabout was fair play. “I’d open your zip ever so slowly,” she began. “I’d stroke you through your pants until you couldn’t bear the friction any longer and begged me to remove them. After I’d got rid of your clothes I’d kneel down in front of you. My breath would ghost over your cock but the only part of me that touched you would be my hair.”

He hadn’t moved since she’d begun to speak, captivated by the sound of her voice. She could see that he was digging his nails into his palms, trying not to make a sound. The pictures she was creating in her mind didn’t help her state of arousal one bit, but she managed to keep her voice from wavering. “Then I’d take you into my mouth, caressing you with my tongue, finally sucking on you until the only thing you cared about was what I would do next.”

His pupils were dilated and he wasn’t able to stifle a groan. “Rose...”

She ignored him and went on, “Every once in a while I’d scrape along your cock with my teeth, so gently that you wouldn’t even be sure I was touching you at all. Then I’d release you and would lick my way down to the base, cradle your balls in my hands and play with them until you begged me to...”

She could see the very moment he relented. His eyes narrowed and with two quick steps the Doctor was standing right in front of her, his left hand fumbling with the fly of his jeans, his right tangled in her hair, cradling her head against the wooden door while he assaulted her mouth with his tongue. Another wave of heat flashed through her and pooled in her centre. She hadn’t thought she could get any more aroused, but he proved her wrong.
Her hands joined his and within seconds they freed his straining erection from its confinements. She began to stroke him, using the liquid at the tip of his penis to lubricate her hand. He pulled her dress up, pushed her knickers aside and entered her first with one, then with two fingers, setting a steady rhythm, stretching her. She moaned, clutched his shoulder with her left to steady herself and realised only now that he was still wearing his leather jacket.

He released her mouth, dropped to a knee and sucked at her left nipple. The friction of her dress and the lace of her bra against the sensitised bud, in combination with his fingers still moving slowly in and out, in and out, drove her further and further towards the precipice.

She reached for the hand that had cradled her head at first and was now caressing her other breast. She took the index finger in her mouth, swirled her tongue around it and finally sucked. A growl escaped his throat. Rose released the digit and ran her fingers through his close-cropped hair, slightly scraping his skin with her fingernails. He almost purred and she nearly lost her footing at the sensations the vibration caused on her nipple.

“Doctor, please...” she moaned. He still hadn’t touched her clit and she was aching for contact, for friction, anything. She tried to writhe a bit, so her knickers would rub against the little bundle of nerves, but he immediately removed his fingers from her entrance. She nearly sobbed at the loss.

He released her breast and got up again, licking his fingers clean. “You are not to touch yourself until I say so,” he repeated his earlier command, his eyes piercing her.

Rose shivered. She was so turned on, she almost couldn’t bear the tension any longer. Then he kissed her, his straining erection pressing into her body, but still not anywhere near where she needed it. She could taste herself on his lips. “What do you want, Rose?” he asked, his voice tense as if he was clinging to the last shreds of his self-control as well.


It was the absolute honesty of her statement and the unconditional love in her eyes that broke him. The Doctor raised her body. She wrapped her legs around his waist and clutched his shoulders. With the hand that didn’t prevent her head from banging into the wood of the door he guided his cock to her entrance. He entered her in one powerful thrust and she moaned. He paused for a moment to give her time to adjust, then he began to drive into her, slow at first but with increasing speed and force.

“What, Rose?” He knew exactly what she wanted and he knew he would probably have to pay for making her beg, but he didn’t care. He simply couldn’t resist. More specifically, he couldn’t resist her, hadn’t been able to for a long time. Sometimes he wondered why he’d even tried to fight it for so long.

“Let me touch myself, please.”

“Anything you want, Rose,” he replied and began to pound into her again, harder and faster than before, while seeking out her mouth for a passionate kiss.

She wriggled her arm between their bodies and began to rub her clit in time with his strokes. He abandoned her mouth, which elicited a moan from Rose. His lips trailed down her neck and he tasted her sweaty skin. He kissed her pulse point and rested his lips there for a moment before he began to suck and nibble. She shuddered and he increased his efforts. Eventually he was certain he would leave a mark and soothed it with his tongue, then licked his way up to her earlobe and followed the curve of the shell. Finally he sensed that she was close and his movements grew more erratic.
“Come for me, Rose,” he whispered, then bit her earlobe lightly.

Suddenly she was clenching around him, nearly deafening him with her scream. In all his lives he had never seen anything as beautiful as Rose Tyler coming undone in his arms. It took him only a few more thrusts and white light exploded behind his eyelids. He emptied himself into her, panting heavily, barely able to stand upright, while she clung to him and caressed his head.

“I love you, Doctor,” she murmured and collapsed against him, unable to move a single limb. He had to admit that his own condition was not much better. He took a few staggering steps towards the small regency style sofa in the corner next to the fireplace, where he deposited her lovingly and straightened her clothes. Then he readjusted his own garments and sat down on the floor, leaning against the seat cushion, holding her hand.
Wings of Gold - Part II

Chapter Summary

A bit of necessary explanation...

Wings of Gold - Part II

“You know, I had plans for the evening,” he said eventually.

“You and a plan? Tell me more,” she mocked him.

“Oi! I do plan things. Well, sometimes,” he clarified, “but only if it’s worth the effort. Anyway, I would have made dinner.”

“Dinner? Really?”

“Rose, you know that I can cook, I just choose not to,” he replied in a mock offended tone. “And I thought you would have remembered the crème brûlée.”

She unconsciously licked her lips. He grinned and leaned over to kiss her.

“And what would have happened then?” she asked breathlessly after he had released her.

“We would have eaten, of course.” That gained him a swat against his shoulder.

“And what exactly stops us from doing just that now?”

The Doctor laughed. “Are you trying to tell me that you’re hungry?”

She grinned mischievously. “Well, all these physical activities burn a lot of energy...”

~o~o~o~

A bit of exploring revealed which door led to the kitchen, and Rose discovered a bedroom with an en suite. She used the loo and went in search of the Doctor. He had retreated to the kitchen and was currently searching for something in the depths of his leather jacket. Eventually he retrieved an apron and donned it, keeping his back firmly to Rose, although she certainly didn’t miss the fact that the tips of his ears had turned into a rather lovely shade of pink. Eventually he turned around and Rose discovered the ‘Kiss the Doc’ embroidery.

“Let me guess. The apron is Jack’s fault,” she commented drily.

The Doctor grinned. “Remember Ionidas Prime where he got you that ‘Kiss the cook’ apron?”

“Yeah. He gave you a package but wouldn’t tell me what he found for you.” She laughed. “Well, at least yours doesn’t have any frills. That would kind of ruin the mood,” she added, mischief sparkling in her eyes.
He looked at her questioningly and she elaborated, “A man who can actually cook is sexy as hell.”

“Is that so?” The suggestive tone in his voice made her knees go weak. Again.

“Oh, definitely.”

“Then let’s hope that I live up to your expectations.” He smirked and opened the fridge. The empty fridge. The very empty fridge that contained nothing but a bowl full of ice cubes.

Seeing his incredulous expression, Rose desperately tried to hold back a giggle, failed miserably and eventually collapsed into laughter. She leant against the counter until she was able to breathe again. The Doctor looked mortally offended.

“I’m sorry. It’s just... You should have seen your face.”

Eventually a grin crept up on his face and he acknowledged the absurdity of the situation. “You know that you’re going to pay for that, don’t you?”

Rose grinned back. “Nah, I’d say we’re even.” She pecked him on the lips. “Honestly, I don’t care about dinner. We could have gone to the chippy again or you could have bought me that beef milkshake from Satellite Five. I don’t care as long as I’m with you. I know this,” her gesture indicated that she was talking not only about the pavilion, “is a fantasy that can’t last but I’d like to pretend as long as possible.”

~o~o~o~

She had figured it out. A concept that should be completely foreign to her and she had figured it out. The Doctor stared at her in awe. Then he kicked the fridge shut with the heel of his boot and took her hand. He led her back to the main room and activated the old-fashioned wind-up gramophone on the small table next to the sofa. The first notes of the Moonlight Serenade filled the room.

“Would the lady like to dance?”

“How did you pull this off?” she asked, her hands moving to his neck.

He held her at the waist, his right caressing her back, and they swayed to the music for some time, her head resting against his shoulder, before he answered. “It’s not really a fantasy, more like a dream we’re sharing, and it is only possible because you agreed to bond with me. Before Darlig Ulv Stranden all I could do was send a message through the Void, and that only worked because the cracks hadn’t closed yet.” He paused for a moment, considering. “I think the TARDIS somehow fuels it.”

“The TARDIS?”

“Yes. And believe me, I had nothing to do with it. I wouldn’t even have asked. I thought she’d downright refuse. It’s not easy to get a TARDIS to do something she doesn’t want to. You could force her, of course, but she’d fight you every step of the way, and probably beyond. And my frankly magnificent time ship is definitely the most stubborn being in the entire universe, including the combined forces of you, me and your mum.” He grinned. “Sometimes I still wonder how I made it off that junkyard, let alone Gallifrey. She really must like me.”

“Oh, she does,” Rose said. Her reply sounded as if it was coming from a great distance and her eyes seemed to be staring into a reality only she could perceive. Then she smiled at him lovingly. The Doctor winced inwardly. He had the nagging feeling that Bad Wolf wasn’t done with them yet, but he ignored it for the moment and smiled back.
“Anyway, since the moment she agreed to me as her pilot we’ve been sharing a bond. Mind you, not like the bond that’s developing between us, but still a direct mental connection.” He thought for a moment, then he decided to voice his suspicions. “Although you might even have a more powerful connection with her than I could ever imagine.”

“Me? Why me? I’m not even telepathic.”

He looked at her, sighing inwardly. She would find out anyway, sooner or later, and sooner was probably for the better. Being jeopardy-friendly and a telepath was not exactly a safe combination if she ever came across a bunch of not-so-well-meaning telepathic aliens unprepared. And it might even spare him the slap he was bound to receive if he didn’t tell her, she discovered it on her own and found out that he knew all along. “You might very well be telepathic now. You looked into her heart, Rose, and I don’t think we’ve discovered every single change caused by that.”

“So basically you’re saying that because you and I share a connection with each other and with the TARDIS she was able to bridge the Void somehow. But why now?”

“A real bonding is very rare, has been for centuries, millennia even. It’s a process that takes some time, although it would develop much faster if we were together. A full bond can only be achieved through close physical contact over a period of time.”

She grinned.

He grinned back. “Not necessarily sex, Rose, although I certainly wouldn’t mind. And before you ask, metaphysical sex doesn’t count.”

Rose narrowed her eyes.

Seeing her expression, the Doctor hastily corrected himself. “As corporeal contact, of course. The sex itself was fantastic. Anyway, without being physically close all we can achieve is this. Otherwise we would be able to be in each other’s minds, experience what the other one is feeling, share our thoughts.”

He should probably have explained this sooner, he realised. Given how she had reacted to the TARDIS translating for her she might not bear this well. “I can still undo it if you want me to...” he offered tentatively.

“Don’t you dare!”

This time her expression told him that he was about to find out how much metaphysical slaps stung if he stuck to this line of thought. “I was just thinking... I didn’t even explain properly before I asked, and that’s just not fair to you,” he said carefully.

She smiled. “I love you, Doctor. Of course I would have said yes. But don’t try to change the topic.”

“I’m not. Well, it took some time for the bond to develop enough that this would work, and both of us have to be asleep...” He cut himself off before he could say more.

“Don’t tell me. You’ve tried to avoid sleep until you collapsed.”

She’d always been able to see through his armour, right from the beginning. He nodded. “I thought the nightmares about the Time War had been terrible, but now... Whenever I close my eyes all I see is you, falling into the Void, but there is no Pete to catch you...” He trailed off and stared at a point at the wall.
“Doctor, look at me.” He returned his gaze to her and she cupped his face with her hands. “I’m here and I’m safe. It’s just a dream.”

He nodded slowly.

“But I still don’t understand how this didn’t happen earlier.”

“Like I said. For once we managed to be asleep at the same time and...”

“For the first time in almost half a year?” she interrupted him, staring at him suspiciously. “You can’t tell me that you managed to avoid sleep for six months.”

He stilled completely and noticed only now that the record had run out minutes ago. “Half a year? Six months?” He knew he sounded like a parrot, but he couldn’t help himself. It had only been a few weeks since Darlig Ulv Stranden for him.

“Five months, two weeks and six days,” she clarified.

He wanted to smack himself. He’d completely forgotten about the time difference. And he still didn’t have any idea how that phenomenon could possibly exist. He had to do something to get her back. Soon.

“Doctor? How long has it been for you?”

“Four weeks,” he admitted finally. She stared at him with a horrified expression. He understood. He’d let her down, and he didn’t have the slightest idea how to do something about it. If he didn’t find a way to cross the Void soon she’d... He didn’t even want to think about it. He opened his mouth to apologise, but her next words startled him.

“You’ve tried to avoid sleeping for four weeks? Are you mad?”

“Rose...”

She freed herself from his arms and took a step back. “Don’t Rose me! You have to sleep properly, you know that. I don’t want to lose you just because you’re exhausted and get yourself killed! Not to mention that I like this body.”

Her eyes blazed with anger and she sounded as if him regenerating would be a personal affront. At her offended tone he chuckled involuntarily and eventually broke into laughter while Rose stared at him as if she suspected he’d lost it.

Finally he recovered enough to say something, still a silly grin on his face. “Here we are, dancing in a pavilion built on the rim of the continental shelf on Brighton that only exists in our minds, I’m waiting for you to yell at me because I left you for more than six months in a parallel universe and haven’t figured out yet how to get you back, and then you yell at me because I might regenerate due to lack of sleep? Oh, I love you.”

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The anger vanished as quickly as it had come. He had thought she’d yell at him for not endangering two universes just to get her back? She had known it would be difficult, he had told her as much on Darlig Ulv Stranden, and if what was happening right now was all she could ever get she’d happily accept the unexpected gift and not ask for more. But the whole not sleeping thing... The dreams he’d had about the Time War had been horrible, he’d let slip enough for her to know that, but now she was the cause of even worse nightmares? He wouldn’t even have told her if she hadn’t figured it out
on her own. Oh, Doctor...

“Come here,” she said and embraced him. His arms came around her and she found herself in an almost bone-crushing hug. Neither of them moved for a long time. The Doctor seemed to be unable to let her go. Not that she wanted him to. She hadn’t even been aware of how much she needed one of his patented ‘The Doctor and Rose against the rest of the universe’ hugs.

“I miss you so much,” Rose admitted finally. He was the only person she would ever tell how much exactly. “Not even the time travel, just you. The running for our lives, the silly grin that doesn’t get used enough, the hugs, the hand-holding. Just... you being you.” Her voice quavered and she tried to tell herself that she was blinking rapidly only because she had a lash in her eye. Yeah, right. She had quickly learnt to put up a facade for the world, the heiress or the Torchwood employee, and most of the time even the people who knew her best didn’t have any idea how she really felt.

“I promise I’ll do everything in my power to get you back,” he whispered.

She smiled at him, not caring about the tears standing in her eyes. “Only if you also promise not to be reckless and to sleep properly, or I’ll regenerate you myself when I see you next time,” she teased.

“And I thought you liked this body,” he commented drily.

“Well, I do like this body, complete with goofy smile, piercing blue eyes and big ears. Not to forget the very nice bum.”

“I’m not sure if I can believe that after that threat.” The suggestiveness in his voice sent a shiver down her spine.

“Want me to prove it?” she grinned, her tongue peeking through her teeth. She pulled him down for a languid kiss. Her tongue slid into his mouth, gently caressing his, while her hands worked on his leather jacket. Finally she managed to push it over his shoulders and it landed on the floor with an audible thud.

His arms came around her, his large hands resting on the small of her back, and he began to respond to her kiss passionately. Eventually she pulled back to catch her breath and smiled at him. “Do you know that there is a bedroom with an extremely comfy bed behind one of these doors?”

“Rose Tyler, what exactly is going on in that mind of yours?”

“Well, there’s only one way for you to find out.”

He grinned expectantly. “Fantastic.”

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Here be more smut. If that or dominant!Nine (or blindfolding) is not your thing, you should probably skip everything up to the three asterisks.

Wings of Gold - Part III

Rose took his hand and led the Doctor into the bedroom. It was surprisingly huge, and taking into account the spacious main room it almost seemed as if the pavilion was bigger on the inside. The floor was made of smooth wooden planks that felt warm under her bare feet. The entire room was held in warm colours, contrasted by the bed, which was covered with white sheets.

The Doctor pulled her into his arms and kissed her almost chastely at first, but with increasing intensity. His tongue begged for entrance and she opened her lips to let him in. As she had done with him, he took his time exploring her mouth and rediscovered all the spots that made her moan. Never breaking the kiss he pulled her tighter, as if he wanted to mould them into a single being. Her hands glided under his jumper, relearning the naked skin on his back. Then she decided that he was definitely far too clothed for what she had in mind, so she tugged at his jumper and broke the kiss just long enough to remove the garment.

She ran her hands over his smooth pectoral muscles, slung her arms around his neck, and this time she kissed him, first running her tongue lightly along his lips, then entering his mouth and stroking his tongue slowly. She could feel his growing erection against her stomach.

Sometimes she still couldn’t believe that he loved her, had asked her to bond with him. He was the most powerful being in the universe and he had chosen an ordinary shop girl from a council estate on a backwater planet named Earth. He could have done so much better. Whenever she lay awake at night she wondered when he would finally realise that and leave her behind.

In the first light of the morning she would banish these thoughts and put them back into the darkest corner of her mind, then she would gather her courage and face the day, to fulfil the promise she had made to herself, to do what he wanted her to do. Have a fantastic life. The Doctor was the one who had shown her how to do this, shown her a better way to live her life, to live. If there was anything she could do to make their separation easier for him, to give him something to hold onto, to drive the nightmares away, she would do it. She wanted him to lose control, to be completely himself in these short few hours fate had granted them.

She slowly bit his lip, gently at first, then with increasing force. He pushed into her involuntarily and she moaned. A split second later his hands were on her back, touching the zip of her dress, about to pull it down. She wanted to give in to the temptation, wanted to feel him inside her, bringing her to completion, but she resisted. There was something she wanted to do first.

“No. Not yet. Would you...” She hesitated for a moment. “Would you let me pleasure you first?” She
blushed violently.

He gave her a smile that nearly broke her heart and cupped her cheeks with his large hands. “I told you before, Rose. Anything you want.”

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He had known Rose had something in mind when she had led him into the bedroom and he was going to let her do whatever she wanted. He was hers until the end of the universe and beyond. Sometimes he still wondered how that had happened.

She had a tendency to wander off, she was too jeopardy-friendly for her own good, and he certainly could have done without frequently visiting her harpy of mother. But somehow the beautiful woman in front of him had dragged him back from the brink of madness, had managed to distract him with brilliant smiles and life-saving hugs, and somewhere along the road she had stolen his hearts, mind and soul, piece by piece. Not that he had fought it.

Her fingers traced circular patterns on his arms and his torso, slowly closing in on his nipples, arousing them to taut buds, grazing them with her fingernails. Her lips found his pulse point and she sucked and nibbled until he was certain it would leave a mark. He made no move to stop her. He was hers and she had every right to claim him, as he had done before. Then she bit him.

He hissed sharply, thrust against her, and realised that she had moved her hand and was now cupping his erection. He felt her warm fingers through the fabric of his jeans and couldn’t suppress a moan. When he noticed her smug smile he decided that there would be payback. Very sweet payback.

He groaned. “Rose.”

“Yes, Doctor?” She smiled sweetly and began to move her hand.

The little minx. She knew exactly what she was doing to him. He drew her to him and kissed her hard, trapping her hand between their bodies. The feel of her warmth against him made him want to throw her on the bed and have his way with her until she begged for mercy. He fought the urge, but he knew he was losing the battle. Quickly. Her strokes became faster and his jeans now were really uncomfortably tight. He bit back another moan.

“Rose, let me...” He lost track of his thoughts when she ran her thumb over his nipple.

“Later. I promise.” She smiled and peppered his jaw with kisses.

Suddenly she took a step back and her hand was gone. He groaned in frustration. She grinned mischievously, knelt down, opened the laces of his boots and removed them quickly. With nimble fingers Rose undid his fly, her fingers lightly tracing the straining bulge in his pants, then pulled his jeans down. When she got up again, she writhed against him deliberately, her arms slung around his neck, her tongue tracing the curve of his ear.

The Doctor groaned and pushed against her still frustratingly clothed body. Then her hand was back, rhythmically stroking him through his underwear. The last shreds of his self-restraint slowly dissolved into thin air.

“This is torture,” he hissed.

“I know,” she gave back.
“Then stop,” he demanded.

“Why?” she asked, quirking an eyebrow.

“Because I want to make love to you.”

She grinned like the little devil she was. “I suppose you can hold out a bit longer, superior physiology and all that.” She scraped a fingernail over one of his nipples and he groaned almost ferally.

Eventually she freed his aching erection from his pants. He almost sighed in relief and stepped out of the garments pooling at his feet. She ran her fingers along his shaft, lubricating her hand with the fluid she found on the tip. She began to stroke him again, ever so slowly increasing force and speed while she kissed him passionately. He wouldn’t have thought he could get any harder, but she proved him wrong.

She ran her thumb lightly over the tip of his penis and circled it. He hissed sharply. “Rose!”

“You have no idea how much I want to have you inside me,” she told him. “How much I want you to shag me senseless. But not yet.”

She knelt down and trailed along his shaft with her wet tongue, licking every inch until there wasn’t a part of him she hadn’t caressed. Then she blew on him, before she engulfed his erection with her warm mouth and began to suck.

His time sense fled him.

From his position he had a fantastic view of her cleavage, highlighted by the low-cut neckline of her dress. He hated the black piece of fabric with a passion that surprised him. All he wanted to do was to rip it off her body and bury himself in her. He was close to coming, had been even before she had taken him into her mouth. His erection was almost painfully hard. He balled his hands and dug his fingernails into his skin, trying to get some semblance of sanity back.

“Rose, no,” he managed to grunt out. “Let me be inside you.”

She grinned impishly around him and sucked harder, this time taking his balls into her hands and massaging them lightly. Despite his determination not to get off in her mouth he couldn’t stop himself from thrusting into her. His need to be inside her when he came and his pride warred with each other, and his pride lost. “Please, Rose. I need to...”

When she released him with a soft ‘pop’ it came as a surprise. She rested back on her heels, her fingers trailing along his inner thighs, and looked at him serenely, almost expectantly.

Gripping her at her arms the Doctor yanked her to her feet. When he crashed his lips against hers in an almost bruising kiss, he could taste himself on her. He bit her lower lip, although not quite hard enough to draw blood, and her body became pliant in his arms. Her soft moans were nearly his undoing, but he somehow managed to hold back from taking her right then.

“You know you’re going to pay for this?” he growled when he had finally regained a small fraction of his self control.

She raised her eyebrows provocatively and licked her lips. “Oh, really?”

He smirked almost cruelly. Before he took her he would wipe that expression of smugness from her face. Thoroughly. He took a deep breath to calm down a bit. This was going to take some time.
“Turn around and close your eyes.” Rose obeyed, now standing with her back to him. He discovered a piece of crimson silk on the nightstand and retrieved it, barely able to walk. He suppressed another moan. “You,” he observed, “are overdressed.”

“Then do something about it,” she challenged.

“Oh, I will.” His voice was full of dark promises.

He carefully brushed her hair aside and revealed the nape of her neck, planting a feather light kiss just beneath the hairline. Then he covered her eyes with the scrap of fabric. “That alright?”

“Yeah.”

The Doctor sucked at her right earlobe and trailed the curve of her shoulder with his fingertips until he reached the strap of her dress, while his left hand caressed her breast. He followed the line of the fabric, slightly grazing her flesh with his fingernails until he reached the zip. His mouth abandoned her earlobe and he scraped along her spine with his teeth, every once in a while soothing the skin with his tongue, while he pulled down the zip of her dress, inch by inch. He could feel her shiver under his ministrations.

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Rose shivered in anticipation, already losing track of time, and shifted in her damp knickers. She was certain he would make her beg long before this was over, but seeing him lose control had definitely been worth it. She desperately wanted to feel him inside her, filling her, completing her. But she had started this game, and now she had to bear the consequences. She didn’t even think of not letting him do what he wanted. She trusted him implicitly, always had, always would.

Abruptly the Doctor stepped back, abandoning her body completely. “I know you’re wet for me, Rose,” he growled. “Your scent is driving me crazy. But turnabout is fair play, don’t you think?”

Suddenly she felt his fingers tingling over her skin. He pushed the straps of her dress over her shoulders, and the garment slid along her body and pooled at her feet. He began to caress her arms, her breasts, the lace of her bra, creating delicious sensations against her hot skin. The only parts of him that touched her were his hands, although she could sense the heat radiating from his body. This was her only indication where he might be. She felt as if a panther was stalking her, inaudibly moving in the dark, ready to strike.

He stood behind her and unclasped her bra, and her breasts fell free. She could hear a few quick steps, and then he was in front of her and circled her nipples with calloused fingers, arousing them to taut buds. Suddenly he pulled lightly and she moaned. This was the most sensual experience of her entire life.

Time skipped.

Slowly she realised that the Doctor was caressing her calves now, drawing circular patterns on her skin with his fingertips. She would never have thought that this could be so arousing.

“Too bad you aren’t wearing stockings today,” he murmured. She could feel his breath ghosting over the damp patch of her knickers and shivered again. He had to be kneeling in front of her. She could imagine him, gloriously naked and aroused, his bum resting on his heels. More heat pooled in her centre.

“Your fantasy,” she managed, nearly incoherent from the sensations he was creating. She wouldn’t be able to move a single limb if her life depended on it.
“Shared dream,” he corrected absently, his attention elsewhere.

His hands moved upwards and she shifted lightly when he reached the back of her knee. He ignored it and now she could feel his fingers stroking the sensitive flesh of her inner thighs. Just before he reached the seam of her knickers, he stilled completely and breathed her in. She moaned in unadulterated need, yearning for him to touch her.

His fingers pressed against her entrance, only the thin scrap of satin preventing him from penetrating her. The strain on the fabric finally provided some friction against her throbbing clit but it wasn’t enough. She was rapidly losing her grip on sanity. Then he removed his fingers and she whimpered. Not long now, and he would have reduced her to a quivering mass of want.

Time skipped again.

Suddenly the Doctor rubbed her clitoris through the fabric of her knickers and simultaneously sucked at her nipple. The unexpected friction was almost too much to bear. When he gently bit the bud her knees began to buckle. She barely managed to hold herself upright. She was so close, she almost sobbed from the effort it took her not to surrender to the sensations he was creating. She didn’t want to. Not like this. She bit her lip deliberately, used the pain to concentrate. She knew she’d start begging very soon. “I want you inside me when I come,” she told him.

“Oh, you’re not coming. Not yet.” The way he phrased his words made it sound as if it had never even been in question. He was smirking again, she could hear it. Then, finally, he removed her knickers. She could feel him entering her with a long finger, setting a steady rhythm. She whimpered, almost sobbed. She needed more than this, needed to touch him, needed him inside her.

Then he was gone again, his entire presence vanished from her perception. “Doctor? Please...” She knew she sounded almost desperate. She might be going mad, right here, right now. Wherever and whenever that was.

He took her completely by surprise when he scooped her up, his erection pressing deliciously against her hip, deposited her on a soft surface and removed the blindfold.

Time returned to its normal flow. Rose found herself on the bed, the Doctor hovering over her, supporting himself on his right hand, and then he kissed her forcefully, his tongue invading her mouth, gliding against hers in a sensual dance. She moaned and reached for him, desperate to touch him. Her hands slid over his back and drew him nearer.

“Make love to me,” she said when he finally released her, her voice somewhere between a demand and a plea.

He aligned their bodies and with one infinitely slow thrust he entered her, filling her completely. She moaned and arched into him. He moved leisurely, pulled back until only the tip of his penis was sheathed within her then pushed into her again in a fluid motion. Her arousal began to build even higher than before. She ran her hands over his back, her feet caressing his calves, urging him on, but he kept the rhythm steady. He seemed inclined to drive her insane with need.

Time lost its meaning once again. Her perception reduced to the feeling of him moving inside her, driving her higher and higher. He slowly began to stroke her clit with his index finger, in time with his thrusts. She closed her eyes, the sensations almost too much to bear.

“Doctor, please...” She was wound up so tightly, she might very well go mad.

“Look at me, Rose.” His voice was barely louder than a whisper, but she heard him. She opened her
eyes and sanity returned to her for a few brief moments.

“I love you,” she said, almost matter-of-factly, as if she was stating an unshakable truth.

He returned her gaze, and she felt like eternity was staring back at her. “I love you,” he declared. The force behind his words would hold entire universes together.

She shivered, and he pushed back into her warmth while he pressed her clit. She had been hovering on the edge for so long she hadn’t even realised how close she was until this powerful thrust sent her over the precipice. Her mind scattered into a million pieces. For an immeasurable amount of time conscious thought abandoned her.

Eventually she felt on the edge of her awareness that the Doctor was still moving inside her while she was clenching around him. She reached up and ran her fingers through his close-cropped hair, caressing his scalp.

“Come for me, my love,” she told him, sounding almost reverent.

His eyes never leaving hers the Doctor thrust into her one more time and emptied himself into her body. Then he collapsed atop of her, his penis still buried in her, his weight a welcome reassurance of his presence. She gently traced the angles of his face. She had never seen him so at peace, so content before, as if the demons that were haunting him had left him for the moment. If only she could make this last.

After a long time he eventually slipped out of her, rolled over and engulfed her in his arms, his fingers lightly tracing the lines of her body. She snuggled against him, kissed him softly and let out a contented sigh. She could spend the rest of her life like this. Neither of them spoke, as if they were afraid to break the spell.

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Finally the Doctor broke the silence. “Tell me about your life.” He began to play with a strand of her hair.

Her life. On Darlig Ulv Stranden she had promised to herself that she would not let desperation claim her and she would not go home, watch the telly, have beans on toast and wait for time to pass. That was not who she had become and she would not go back to being that sort of person.

“Well, thanks to a shortage in alien invasions in the last six months I managed to get my A-levels,” she said eventually, a tiny smile on her face. It wasn’t exactly saving the universe, but it still was something she had achieved on her own, something to be proud of. “Even one in physics, of all things. You won’t believe it, but the gravitational constant is minimally different in Pete’s world.”

The Doctor stared at her, surprise and pride shining in his eyes in equal measure.

“What? Did you think I never listened when you and Jack talked about science?” Rose caught her tongue between her teeth. “All the time I spent on the jump seat pretending to read a magazine while I stared at your bum and listened to your technobabble, and you never noticed?”

“Oh! That was a highly scientific exchange of vital information.”

“Looked more like a pissing contest, from my perspective.”

He was wounded. “Time Lords don’t have pissing contests.” Not to forget that they never sulked. And he had noticed. Thus the pissing contest. Oh, he really wasn’t the least bit hypocritical, was he?
“Don’t worry, you won,” she soothed. “Anyway, I didn’t pass in history.”

“You travel through time and you fail history?” he asked incredulously.

She laughed. “Well, it’s a little bit problematic if history turns out to have happened differently in another universe. There was a war in the nineteen-twenties between Castile and France on one, and the UK, or better, the PRGB on the other side, and the London Blitz never happened, while one of Queen Victoria’s sons founded Torchwood, shortly before they abolished the monarchy.”

“That’s probably a valid reason,” he allowed, slightly mollified.

She opened her mouth and he asked quickly, “And what else have you been up to?”

He knew she had wanted to ask what he had been doing. Rose already worried about him enough as it was. No need to add to that by telling her what his life without her was like, that he felt as if he was stuck in a dark tunnel without being able to see the light at the end. She let it go, although he was fairly certain he wasn’t off the hook yet.

“Hmmmm, let me think. As I said, there was a certain lack of alien invasions in the last couple of months, mostly tourists instead, so not much running for my life. Well, if you don’t count my mum trying to hook me up with two or three pretty society boys and me running like hell from them.” As soon as she had finished the sentence she winced and bit her lip. Clearly she hadn’t wanted to tell him this.

“She what?” His eyes narrowed dangerously and a green-eyed monster raised its ugly head.

“Shhh. Nothing happened. I was way too fast for them,” she told him with a forced grin, cupped his cheeks and kissed him softly. The monster slowly calmed down again.

“It was partly my own fault,” she admitted finally. “It took me some time to tell mum that you had asked me to bond with you. She had been nagging me, told me to get on with my life, meet a nice bloke and have some fun, and I just blurted it out. You can imagine how the rest of the conversation went.” She shrugged in feigned nonchalance. “At the next Vitex party she began introducing the most boring people I’ve ever met, and that includes the bureaucrats from Noia Five. She only stopped because I threatened I’d never talk to her again.” She gave him a wry grin. “At least Mickey thought it was funny.”

“Oh, Rose... I didn’t think.”

“Doctor, I walked into this with my eyes wide open. I knew what could happen.” She smiled shakily and continued in a very see-through attempt to change the subject, “So apart from running from boring society people and persuading alien tourists that we had birds for Christmas dinner, not people, I had a bit of time to think and I came up with a couple of questions.”

The Doctor winced inwardly. This was his fault. All of it. She was stuck in a parallel universe, her mum was being, well, Jackie, and now Rose was bottling up her emotions. He silently promised that he would fix this. He didn’t know how, not yet, but he would do everything he could to get her back.

He smiled and kissed her. “What questions?” If she could let it go for the moment, he could, too.

“Well, for instance, did you ever wonder how the dimension jumpers worked in the first place?”

No, he hadn’t. And he could smack himself for that. He was sensing a trend.
“A couple of weeks ago Mickey hacked into the archive and stole the plans. I don’t know how much time I spent down in Archives studying them, but I found out that they only worked because there had already been cracks in the walls between dimensions,” Rose said. “We know what caused the breach in our universe, or at least why it got bigger, but what about this one? From what I remember the Cyberleader said they had nothing to do with it. I dunno, but they don’t seem to be the most imaginative lot. I’m tempted to believe him.”

“And Daleks don’t have the capacity for trans-dimensional travel, which means the cracks must have been caused by something else,” the Doctor continued her line of thought.

“And I’ve been wondering... You said the breach on your side would seal itself after the Void had sucked the Cybermen and the Daleks in. This is possibly a stupid question, but what about the cracks on my side? Would they have closed, too? All of them?”

His eyes lit up at the potential implications. “Rose, you’re fantastic! Absolutely brilliant!” He kissed her thoroughly while the very small part of his brain that wasn’t occupied with the woman wrapped around his body was already working its way through several scenarios.

And then she did something with her hips that made him drop every line of thought that was not related to repaying her in kind.

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“Did you find someone?”

He stared at her incredulously. “We’re in bed and you ask me if I travel with somebody?”

Rose planted a kiss on his chest and smiled. “Well, it’s not as if I had anything to worry about. You’re mine.” He definitely wasn’t the only person in this relationship who was slightly possessive.

“Yes, I did. Find someone, that is. Reminds me of Jackie, actually.”

“We’re in bed and you bring up my mum?” She swatted his shoulder. Her playful tone told him that she had forgiven her mum, although he wasn’t sure he could do the same. Truth be told, he wasn’t sure he wanted to.

He rubbed his arm. “Ouch! See? That’s exactly why she reminds me of your mum.”

“She slaps?” When he didn’t answer Rose started to laugh. “Oh, I think I’d like her.”

He should have anticipated that reaction.

“So what did you do to her that you deserved a slap?”

“Who said I deserved it?” he gave back, decidedly not sounding like a petulant three-year-old. Time Lords were never petulant. And they definitely never sulked. Yeah, right.

“I know you,” she sing-songed.

That she did. Only too well, sometimes. “I got her imprisoned in the Tower.”

“And?” she asked, suspecting that there was more to it.

“And they had already planned our execution.”

“And?”
“I asked her if she had any idea how often I had been sentenced to death in the last couple of years.”

“And then you told her there was nothing to worry about,” she guessed, grinning widely.

“There wasn’t!” he told her indignantly. “Ranulf Flambard was imprisoned in the cell above ours.”

Rose laughed, recognising the name from a school trip to the Tower. “Don’t tell me: She really didn’t see the fun in the situation.”

He grumbled something under his breath.

“Oh, come on, she can’t be that bad.”

“She owns a hat box!” he complained.

The scowl he wore while he made this statement regularly caused despots throughout the universe to give up their nefarious plans and hide in fear, but his tiny human lover collapsed into laughter. “Oh, poor Doctor! A hat box is certainly the height of domesticity!”

“It is!” There was only one person in the entire universe, no, make that multi-verse, he might consider doing something remotely like domestic for and said person was currently in his bed, even if the bed existed only in their minds, and only as long as the TARDIS would be able to fuel the connection. “Tell me you don’t own a hat box,” he demanded.

“And what would you do if I said I did?” she asked with a smirk then laughed at his horrified expression and kissed him. “Nope, you’re safe. Come on, it could be worse. Pets, pretty boys, Jack...”

“We’re in bed and you bring up Jack? Again?”

“Well, it’s not as if you had anything to worry about. I’m yours.”

For the remainder of the night the Doctor made love to Rose Tyler, proving to her exactly whom she belonged to and whom he belonged to, until they fell asleep in each other’s arms.

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Chapter End Notes

Too bad our protagonists will have to face reality again in the next chapter, because it's certainly not going to be rainbows and unicorns for them...
Chapter Six

Chapter Summary

All hell breaks loose - in two universes...

The Doctor slowly woke up from the best sleep he’d had in weeks. As always, holding Rose had helped to keep the nightmares at bay, even if she hadn’t been physically present. He had told Rose that they were sharing a dream, but it was so much more than that. As far as his people had been concerned it was just another aspect of reality, a place that existed beyond time and space. For him the night he had spent with Rose in the pavilion had been as real as if they had landed the TARDIS on the planet. To Rose it would probably seem like a very intense dream, but the memories wouldn’t fade.

Unfortunately it was even more complicated than that. Everything that was done and said there had repercussions in the physical world. He even could influence their surroundings to a certain point, although that apparently did not apply to food, he thought wryly. But there were also other limitations. For example he couldn’t simply bring schematics for a potential Void crossing device to one of their meetings. Not that he had even a basic idea for one. Oh, he really should have explained this better to Rose.

One day they would find a way across the Void, but until then they at least had this. They would be able to see each other, talk to each other, hold each other. Not often, but sometimes. That was something, and it was a lot more than he had dared to hope. Truth be told, he hadn’t even been sure she’d say yes when he’d asked her to bond with him on that godforsaken beach. Now he just had to find a way to get her back.

It was time for a trip to Cardiff, he decided. He owed someone an explanation and an apology. And if he was very, very lucky he might get access to the CCTV footage of the battle of Canary Wharf and a few answers. He showered quickly, donned his clothes and left his room, yelling for his companion. “Donna!”

Two minutes later he was in the console room and set the coordinates for Cardiff, Wales, 2007, then he retreated to the galley and put the kettle on. By the time the tea was ready Donna finally appeared, still yawning widely. “What’s going on?”

“We’re going to Cardiff!” he announced brightly and handed her a mug.

She took it, although the first sip of tea did nothing to improve her mood. Not really unexpected, that, but it couldn’t hurt to try, could it?

“Cardiff? You wake me up just because you want to go to Cardiff?” she asked incredulously.

On seeing her expression, the nerve endings in his left cheek reminded him why it was a really bad idea to piss off Donna Noble. Let alone a Donna Noble who hadn’t finished her first mug of tea yet. Nevertheless he confirmed their destination. “Yep!”

“Are you insane?” she asked, narrowing her eyes.
"Certified on a couple of dozen planets," the Doctor gave back with a slightly manic grin. "But that’s not the reason why I want to go to Cardiff."

"Then why the hell are we going there? What’s so bloody interesting about Cardiff?"

He sighed exasperatedly. "Humans. The truth can be staring you in the face, but you keep ignoring it. Did you ever wonder about the number of gas leaks and mass hallucinations in Cardiff?"

"Should I have?"

The Doctor rolled his eyes. "Donna, what did I say about that big picture of yours?"

She narrowed her eyes even more. "What. Are. You. Talking. About?"

"There is a massive rift through space and time in Cardiff that causes disturbances in time and attracts aliens. And it’s one of the very few places in the universe where the TARDIS can fuel up."

"Are you telling me you want to go to Cardiff for a pit stop?"

"Basically, yes."

"And you can’t have a pit stop on, I dunno, the second star on the right and straight on till morning?"

"Nah, pit stops on Volag-Noc would be a really bad idea. Too cold and too many mass murderers. Besides, I want to meet an old friend." Although the word ‘friend’ was probably pushing it, considering the events on Satellite Five, he added mentally while he dumped his mug in the sink.

"You’ve got friends?"

"Of course I do," the Doctor gave back indignantly. Three or four maybe, if he included those former companions who would probably wait more than half a second before they shut their respective doors in his face.

"Right. And that’s the reason we end up running for our lives wherever we land."

"Oi! That has got nothing to do with it."

"No, that’s just your charming personality."

"I can be very charming, I’ll have you know," he replied petulantly and crossed his arms.

Donna grinned. "Remind me that I ask Rose how you pulled her with that personality when you get her back. It can’t be your piloting skills, or we wouldn’t have ended up on Teralix in the middle of the monsoon season."

The Doctor had barely opened his mouth to respond to this completely, well, mostly unjustified offence when the TARDIS jerked suddenly. He managed to grab the counter, or he would have tumbled against the doorframe. Donna lost her footing and fell against him. It felt as if they’d been hit by something, which should have been completely impossible in the Time Vortex. For about two seconds that felt like an eternity nothing else happened, and then his ship started to shake violently.

"Bugger!" Whatever just had happened, this was Not Good, the Doctor decided, disentangled himself from Donna and left the galley.

"What did you do?" she yelled.
“I didn’t do anything!” he gave back, already halfway down the corridor to the console room, occasionally having to steady himself against the walls to keep upright. He cursed under his breath. The TARDIS seemed to be completely out of control.

Donna followed him hard on his heels. “Well, you must have done something!”

He ignored her accusation. Five seconds later he reached the console room and began circling the console, trying to stabilise their flight path. He desperately adjusted the controls, but without any visible effect. “Hold that lever down!” He pointed wildly in the general direction of the instrument.

Donna dashed to the console and grabbed a lever.

“No, not that one, that would kill us. Take the one next to the green lamps,” he yelled.

Donna complied immediately, while struggling to keep on her feet.

“Second button on the left. Now!”

It took her a moment to reach the button because the ship jerked again, but she managed to press it. Then the Doctor yanked another lever in the opposite direction. The shaking stopped and a mauve flash light began to blink madly.

“What happened?” she asked, panting heavily.

“We’ve left the Time Vortex and she’s piloting through real space,” he replied, adhering to the bare facts. He didn’t even have a basic idea what might have caused this. He stared at the monitor and typed a few commands, but the screen stayed dark. Eventually blue lamps began to light up on the console, indicating various system failures. There couldn’t possibly have been more destruction if someone had blown up the console room, and he didn’t even know what had happened.

“What does that mean? Doctor?”

He ignored her in favour of the status lights. Another light began to flicker. He leaned heavily against the console and closed his eyes in despair. By the looks of it, the dematerialisation circuit was heavily damaged, as well as the temporal stabilisers. If he didn’t get them working again once they’d landed, they’d be stuck there indefinitely. Wherever they were heading to. The TARDIS had diverted every available spark of energy to the engines and didn’t let him access the navigation system. Knowing her, she would put everything she had into getting them to a place where he could find the materials to repair her, but with a damaged TARDIS he really would have liked to at least know where they were going.

Another alarm interrupted his thoughts. They were approaching a gravitational field that was drawing the TARDIS in rapidly. In her current state she would be completely unable to land them securely. And without access to the controls he just could sit and watch. He circled the console in four large steps and pulled Donna to the floor, then he put her arms around a handhold on the console.

“Keep your head down, and whatever you do, hold on to that handle. We’re gonna crash.”

~o~o~o~

Rose sighed, shut the computer down and buried her head in her arms. The report of today’s events was finally done and e-mailed to her supervisor. It hadn’t taken her long to hate Torchwood’s penchant for paperwork passionately. She was tempted to manufacture an invasion — just to get rid of the paperwork for the time being. If only she could be certain that the paper trail after the invasion...
Almost six months ago, she had promised herself that she would have a fantastic life. But sometimes it was just hard. Today had been better than most days, having something to do and running for her life helped. It had been worse when she had been stuck in research. But every so often she would forget and expect to see a leather clad figure reaching for her hand or to hear a rough Northern accent telling the aliens that whatever they were planning ended here and now. She missed him, and the dream she’d had a few nights ago had only helped so much.

Nowadays she ran alone, despite Mickey’s or Jake’s presence. There was a lot less telling the aliens off and a lot more shooting. And with the Doctor there had definitely been a lot less red tape involved. Unless she counted the various times they had ended up in various prisons all over the universe and the additional hours they had spent filling out whatever paperwork the respective local government required to let them go.

She had fond memories of Noia Five. Two hours in a prison cell for crossing a street followed by eight hours being buried under red tape. Finally they had signed the last pages as Bonnie and Clyde and had violated approximately seventeen additional laws on their run back to the TARDIS, the local law enforcement in hot pursuit. Noia was rated fairly high on her personal “places to never visit again” list.

Right. Time for her private research project, aka Advanced Crossing Dimensions. She had already found out that original dimension jump technology had only worked because of the cracks between universes, but she still didn’t know how the cracks had been created in the first place. That was next on the agenda. Children’s play, really, she thought sarcastically.

With another sigh she got up, left the office and turned towards the lift. In the lobby she got out, went into the cafeteria and snatched a few fruits from one of the baskets on the counter.

“Still working?” Eliza, one of the dinner ladies, asked.

“Yeah. Paperwork to finish. You know how it goes,” she lied. “Many people around?” Sometimes the dinner ladies knew better who was in the building than the security team.

“The boss and a few of the directors. Joshua from R&D, and one or two of the archivists.”

Pete had mentioned a board meeting during breakfast this morning, Rose remembered. Her relationship with him still bordered on awkward; and mostly they resorted to small talk. They still differed on various topics and probably always would, but he hadn’t told Jackie that he’d known about the Doctor’s proposal. That had helped, although she wasn’t sure if she really saw him as her dad. It still felt disloyal. But Pete had proven himself as a very good friend, and that was something she wasn’t likely to forget either. He knew her, not the made up story the public relations department of Vitex had told the press, and that was very important to her.

But if Joshua was still in R&D she wouldn’t have a chance to get into the archives undetected. With a smile and wishes for a quiet night she left the cafeteria and went back to the lift. “Sod it!” she decided. What could they do? Fire her? Unlikely. They’d rather confine her to desk duty for the foreseeable future. Not that she’d like that but it was worth it. She pressed the button for sublevel C.

~o~o~o~

Rose rubbed her eyes. She had spent more than two hours in the basement, staring at the report about the dimension jumps, trying to make sense of what she already knew.
Fact one: The Void Ship contained the Genesis Ark and the Genesis Ark was Time Lord technology, obviously. Fact two: There were no Time Lords in this universe, the Doctor had said as much. Both facts combined meant that the ship’s origin was her universe.

From what the Doctor had told her she imagined the Void like the area between the two walls of the Tower of London. Assuming she was right with that image this led to two possibilities. One, the Void Ship had accidently damaged the walls to this universe and created the cracks. If that was the case, had the Cult of Skaro ever entered this universe? She did not exactly look forward to running into renegade Daleks without the Doctor to deal with them, but she would have to prepare herself for the possibility.

The other possibility was that the Void Ship didn’t have anything to do with the cracks on her side of the wall. That would mean that they were sort of natural. And in that case they couldn’t be dangerous to the integrity of this universe, could they?

In addition, they still didn’t know what had happened to the cracks on this side of the Void after the Doctor had closed them on his side. Had they vanished as well? And if they hadn’t, could she use them?

Her musings had reached that point when suddenly her mobile buzzed. She recognised the caller ID.

“Yeah, Mickey?”

“Rose? Emergency. See you in conference room one in ten minutes.” When they had grown up together she would never have imagined how businesslike Mickey could sound.

“Okay.” She pressed the end button, collected her papers and stashed them in a box in the far corner of the archive where hopefully nobody would ever look for something. Then she grabbed her phone and headed for the lift, wondering what was going on.

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Half an hour after the time the meeting should have begun Pete Tyler finally entered conference room one, where eight people were waiting for him. He looked exhausted.

“Sorry. The Defence Secretary called when I was about to leave. Kept going on about the budget.”

A woman who looked as if she was in her fifties groaned. “When will the Defence Secretary learn that we can either spend our time with actually doing our job or with administrating it?”

After a few seconds Rose remembered her name. Jane Cunningham was the head of the R&D department and responsible for the budget. Pete wanted to keep the administration as small as possible, so most directors had two functions. And she seemed to prefer the not-administrative role.

“He’ll get over it,” Pete said. “I’m not going to change a single thing about how this agency works.”

He looked at Mickey. “So, what’s going on?”

“We received an enquiry.” Mickey had been the agent in charge when the first transmission came in and thus the case had been assigned to him. At that point the task had mostly comprised of channelling information to the parties involved, while the decisions had been made elsewhere.

He activated the large monitor that covered one of the walls. A vaguely humanoid alien appeared on the screen, with greenish-black skin and an additional set of eyes. “We are the Corrivex. We seek audience with your world leader,” the alien on the screen said, then Mickey froze the picture.
“That was two days ago. According to the rest of their message they wanted to negotiate a trade agreement.”

“And where exactly is the emergency if this is already two days old?” Terrence Gold was a small man with mousy brown hair who had fought his own personal war against the Cybermen. This had brought him in contact with Torchwood, and now he was in charge of the field agents which meant he was Rose’s supervisor.

“The message was received by the government as well. They sent a reply.”

“And why didn’t they inform us?” Jane Cunningham asked.

“They did,” Pete said, resignation audible in his voice. “After they had sent the reply. Apparently they thought they needed the publicity. I can’t wait for the elections. At least then we might have a government that deserves the name. At the moment we’re just dangling on strings played by whoever pulls tightest.”

Pete was right. Soon after she had come here Rose had found out that there hadn’t been a stable government since the Cybermen attack in 2007. Because so many prominent members of the larger parties had been killed, smaller parties had taken a chance and won seats in the election, making it difficult to form a coalition. Four months ago this universe’s Harriet Jones had had to step down as president because her coalition had lost its majority, but her successor had brought her back into the cabinet. She was too influential among members of all political parties to ignore her completely. Unfortunately the instability of the government meant that politics followed no clear course, and it was also part of the reason why the zone system hadn’t been revoked yet.

“The delegation was led by the Vice President.” The audience groaned. Vice President Stanton was well known for his lack of diplomacy, but like Harriet he was very influential. “Harriet Jones wanted to bring us in, but the President ignored her. The meeting took place this morning.” Mickey paused. “One hour ago we received another transmission.”

He pressed a button on his remote control and another alien appeared on the screen. Unlike the one they had seen on the previous transmission he had very distinctive markings on his head, and his words chilled Rose to the bone. “A member of your delegation has attempted to kill our leader. According to our laws this means his death, and everyone associated with him will suffer the same consequences. We require you to give your consent to their execution in accordance with article seventy-six of the Shadow Proclamation. If you refuse we will consider ourselves at war with your planet. You have forty-eight hours.”

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When the Doctor came back to his senses he found himself on the grating. The console room was almost completely dark, lit only by a faint glow from the time rotor and the status lights on the console, and the hum of the TARDIS was barely noticeable.

He set up and winced slightly. He had a couple of bruises and a quickly developing headache, but that was all. Nothing what a mug of tea wouldn’t cure.

A glance to his left told him that Donna was unconscious, but somehow she had managed to hold onto the handle. Although he probably should have anticipated that, he thought wryly, given her stubbornness. He knelt next to her and discovered a few formerly undetected bruises in the process, which resulted in a few muttered curses.

Pushing every other thought aside he methodically scanned Donna with the sonic screwdriver. When
the results came up he released a breath he hadn’t even realised he’d been holding. She had a few bruises, mostly where her body had banged against the handle, and she would most likely also have a headache when she woke up, but no other injuries.

Since he didn’t exactly want to carry her through a ship running on auxiliary power that had only emergency lighting for the time being, he decided to wake her. He was fairly certain that she wouldn’t be too happy about the bruises from the crash, making it worse by hitting a corner would be tempting fate. “Donna?”

Her eyelids fluttered and eventually she opened her eyes. “Doctor? What happened?”

“We crashed,” he replied matter-of-factly. “You were unconscious. Think you can walk?”

She tried to set up and groaned. “I feel like I’ve been run over with a lorry. Did you see the plate?”

He smiled briefly and held out his hand. “Let’s get you to the infirmary.”

~o~o~o~

It took him almost fifteen minutes to run the dermal regenerator over every single bruise Donna had received. Although the device hadn’t been designed for this purpose, it was able to repair the damage to the deeper layers of tissue at least partially and lessen the discomfort. That done, the Doctor left a couple of painkillers and a cup of water for her and returned to the console room, not caring about his own bruises.

Donna wouldn’t like that he’d just left her in the infirmary, but his ship was more important. There was no telling where they had landed, and without working instruments he couldn’t even determine which systems were necessary and which they could do without for a while. He was also certain that the TARDIS had diverted energy from the shielding. He just hoped there was enough left to raise the shields again, because without them the exterior of his TARDIS was exactly what it looked like: A wooden box.

He typed a few commands and the monitor came back to life. He started a diagnosis program to get a more detailed overview of the damages than the status lights could provide, then transferred the navigation controls back to the console and called up the coordinates.

~o~o~o~

When Donna entered the console room the Doctor was staring at one of the monitors in disbelief, his hands gripping the screen as if he wanted to break it in half. “Impossible,” he whispered, almost too low to be audible.

Donna circled the column and looked at the screen that showed their surroundings. “That’s not Cardiff,” she stated.

It seemed he hadn’t even realised she was back in the console room until she spoke. He loosened his grip on the monitor and pulled his leather jacket tighter with an unconscious gesture. “No. It’s not.” His voice was hollow.

“That’s all you’ve got to say, Doctor?”

No answer.

Donna tentatively touched his arm and he turned in her direction. His expression was completely blank, and the emergency lighting in the room made him look truly alien. She had never seen him
like this before, not even when he had faced the Racnoss. He looked almost frightened, but there was also something else in his eyes that she didn’t even dare to name. For the first time she wondered what she had gotten herself into.

“Doctor? Where are we?” she asked tentatively.

He avoided her eyes when he answered her question. “This is Skaro.”
Skaro. Planet of the Daleks. No matter how hard he tried, how often he killed them, the Daleks kept coming back, and so did their planet. After what had happened in his seventh life the Doctor had dared to hope that Skaro was gone for good, but the first act of the Time War had proven him wrong.

He opened and closed the fingers of his right hand, subconsciously searching for support that wasn’t there. Even thinking about what had happened on this planet during the Time War scared him to death, and now it looked like they were stranded here, at least until he got the dematerialisation circuit working again.

He typed a few commands and stared at the monitor, hoping that just this once the universe would be kind. They might have ended up in a time period before Davros began with his clever little genetic experiment. When the results came up he closed his eyes.

“Doctor!” Donna’s voice interrupted his thoughts. He winced at her volume and realised only now that he had ignored her for more than two minutes.

“Yes, Donna?” He knew that he sounded distressed, but he simply couldn’t muster the energy for anything else.

“What’s the problem?”

The Doctor laughed sardonically. His TARDIS was so severely damaged that he could barely feel her in his mind, not to mention that the shielding was down, and they were stuck on the home planet of the most vicious aliens the universe had ever seen. Problem was definitely the wrong expression. Bloody nightmare would be much more accurate.

He couldn’t even begin to tell how much he longed for one of Rose’s life-saving hugs. He pulled his leather armour even tighter around him and buried his hands in his pockets. His eyes finally met Donna’s. “Skaro is the planet of the Daleks. My people fought a war with them, and we lost,” he told her, desperately trying to sound matter-of-factly.

“So these people are…”

He interrupted her ruthlessly, every pretence of composure gone. “The Daleks aren’t people. They’re anything but. They don’t have feelings, apart from hate. You can’t reason with them and they’ve got only one objective: Kill every last being in the entire universe that’s not like them.” He was almost yelling by now. So much about keeping emotions out of this.

Donna staggered back a few steps. “But…”

He knew he was scaring her, but he went on regardless. “There is no ‘but’, Donna. My entire planet is gone because of them.” He took a deep breath to calm himself down. Yelling at Donna wouldn’t help. But still… The Daleks had cost him so much, too much. Not only his planet, but ultimately Rose.

Donna was silent for a while. “But what does that mean?” she asked eventually.

“Apart from the fact that they’ll kill me on sight?” he asked, the sarcasm back in his voice.

“Well, as you point out repeatedly this is a time machine, right? What if we, I dunno, ended up before they went to war with your people?”
The Doctor shook his head. Unfortunately they were having no such luck. Like Earth, the entire history of this planet was entwined with his, and since his timeline was affected by the Time Lock, so was the timeline of Skaro. That had left a limited number of eras when they could have landed, none of them exactly promising for various reasons. The figures on the monitor had confirmed his worst suspicions.

“Judging by the radiation levels outside, it’s been about fifty years since most of this continent suffered the fall-out of a neutron bomb during a war between the two most advanced groups on the planet.” Which made it exactly as long since he had failed to prevent the creation of the Daleks, in their timeline, not in his. And he was certainly not going to tell Donna that.

“A neutron bomb? You land us on a planet where we are going die of radiation? Are you insane?” He really should have anticipated on which part of his statement Donna would focus. “Donna, do you sometimes engage that brain of yours? This is probably the last planet in the entire universe I’d want to set foot on ever again, and you think I landed us here on purpose?” he asked scathingly. He could see that she was getting angrier with every word, but he didn’t care. “I was aiming for Cardiff when the TARDIS crashed, in case you hadn’t noticed.” He buried his hands deeper in his pockets and turned back to the console, a closed-off expression on his face. “I should’ve known. But I just had to pick another stupid ape…”

“Bloody alien! Don’t you dare call me stupid!” she shouted at the top of her voice. “I’ve got a right to know if I’m gonna die of radiation or not. And if you had that sort of attitude while travelling with Rose I really think she’s better off where she is now!” He turned on his heel, eyes narrowed, and hissed, “Leave Rose out of this, Donna. You’ve got no idea what you’re talking about. And for god’s sake, leave me alone.”

“Fine,” she gave back. “If you really think so, you can drop me on Earth as soon as possible.” She gave him a long glance, straightened her shoulders and left the console room without another word.

He watched her go, then buried himself under the console, telling himself that rerouting a couple of connections would reduce the time the diagnostic scan needed to complete. He had always been good at lying to himself. For more than ten minutes he just lay there, stared at the wires and tried to pull himself together. Eventually he heard Donna coming back.

“How, you great lump,” she said, nudging his thigh with her shoe. “Have a cuppa. Not that you deserve it.” He sat up and looked at her warily, but took the mug she was handing him. “You sure you’re not going to poison me?” he asked, a forced smile playing around his lips.

“Nah, why would I do that? At least not before you got us off this bloody planet. Besides, Rose would probably kill me if I didn’t keep you in one piece.” She grinned at him.

“So it’s all just self-preservation?”

“Of course. You didn’t think I’d pamper you because of your sunny personality, did you?”

This time his grin was a tiny bit more genuine. “Hand me a spanner?”

She looked around in the console room until she discovered the tool and placed it in his hand.

The Doctor deposited the mug on the grating next to him and vanished under the console again, only to reappear moments later. “Donna?”
Yes?

Thank you.

Eventually Pete broke the silence that had filled the room after the ultimatum they had just received.

“Was that all they transmitted? That doesn’t even make sense! Why would a member of our delegation try to kill their leader?”

Emily Livingston, who was responsible for electronic reconnaissance and the IT department, was the first who answered. “I think they’re just looking for a reason to invade. Everything else simply doesn’t make sense.”

Rose knew she only was here because Pete wanted her to be present. Low ranking field agents like her normally had to wait for the general briefing. It would have been wiser to hold back, but she’d never been exactly diplomatic. Rationally she knew she’d get in trouble but she didn’t care. Some things were more important. So she blurted out, “That doesn’t make sense either.”

Eight people faced her. Rose suppressed the urge to fidget under their scrutiny.

“What is she doing here?” Matthew Powell, the head of biological research and xenobiology, asked Pete acridly. It seemed he hadn’t even noticed her before, probably because his ego kept getting in his way, Rose thought. “It’s bad enough that you give her a job here, but as it looks we’re on the brink of an invasion. We really don’t need unqualified comments from someone who’d be better off painting her nails!”

“You noticed!” she replied sweetly. “I was wondering if the colour really suited me. What do you think? Oh well, I’ll have to change it anyway. Mauve’s the colour for impending invasions this season.” She grinned at Mickey, who had to cover a laugh with a fake cough. Then she became serious again and faced Pete. “Seriously, this doesn’t make sense. Why would they need to manufacture an excuse for an invasion, let alone send a message first?”

“Go on.” Pete said, and Terrence Gold sent her an encouraging smile. At least her supervisor didn’t think she was just a society girl.

Bloody tabloids. On the very rare occasion she went somewhere else than just to the pub around the corner after work she would find a juicy story of her newest ‘escapades’ in the papers. Hugging someone meant she had an affair, drinking a glass or two meant she was on a bender and wearing comfortable clothes meant she was pregnant. That logic completely escaped her. And it certainly didn’t help that people like Matthew Powell seemed to believe in such reports, especially since they should know better.

“First let’s assume that Emily is right and they are using this as an excuse. Why would they do that?” Rose asked the people in the conference room.

“They’re aliens,” Powell said dismissively. “We don’t know what’s going on in their head. They don’t feel like us.”

“If you really think that you’ve definitely got the wrong job!” It came out as a reflex. Inwardly she winced as soon as she had spoken the words, but she held Powell’s gaze evenly. Judging by his glare she had made an enemy. Oh well, couldn’t be helped. She just couldn’t stand people with that sort of attitude. “From my experience it’s mostly just the package that differs, and sometimes not even that. Apart from a few exceptions, and yes, those are including the Cybermen, they’re not so
“And you would know that because...”

“I’ve travelled a lot.” That was one way to put it. “If they wanted to invade they could have done so without putting us on red alert first.”

“Yeah, but why would a member of our delegation try to kill one of them? That doesn’t make sense either,” Jane reasoned.

“Right. But at the moment we don’t know what happened there. It could be just a cultural misunderstanding.” That sort of thing happened much more often than she wanted to think about. Just look at those alien tourists last month. They had honestly believed that humans had other people for Christmas dinner instead of a turkey.

“And what do you suggest we should do?” Powell asked condescendingly.

Rose smiled. “We could always ask them what happened.”

He looked at her as if he thought that she owned no more than three working brain cells. “Are you serious?” he asked incredulously. Another cough from the other side of the conference room told her that Mickey had to cover yet another laugh. Powell turned his glare at him.

“Matt, you saw the video,” Pete said, before anyone else could voice their opinion. “If we don’t find a solution quickly we’ll have a war on our hands in less than forty-six hours. And this planet, let alone this country, can’t afford that. We’re still suffering from the aftermath of the Cybermen. At the moment we’re not ruling out any possibility, and if it helps us gain information I don’t see what’s wrong with Rose’s suggestion.”

“You’re only saying that because she’s your daughter.”

“No, I’m not. I’m supporting Rose because what she said was reasonable.” He turned to Terrence. “I want you and Rose to get in contact with the aliens. Find out as much as you can about what happened on their ship. If they let you aboard I also want an assessment of their weaponry, if possible.”

Terrence nodded.

“You let her go with him?” Powell jerked his chin in Rose’s direction.

This time it was Terrence who answered. “Miss Tyler is a qualified field agent. She wouldn’t work for Operatives if she didn’t fulfil the requirements. She is fully capable of this task, and she is not xenophobic, which is just as well, because we really can’t afford a hostile attitude in this situation. If Pete hadn’t assigned her, I would have requested her,” he replied coolly.

The director turned his attention to Powell. “Matt, I want you to find out as much about their physiology as possible. If you’ve got someone who is good at interpreting body language, bring them in, too.”

“Oh, finally you acknowledge that I’m here as well. I was already wondering if I was still working for you.”

Pete sighed exasperatedly. “Matt, when you for once don’t behave like an idiot I actually appreciate your opinion. I’ll send you the transmissions, although that’s all we’ve got so far.” He turned to Mickey. “I want you and Jake to find out who was a member of this delegation and who assigned
Mickey nodded.

“Okay, we’ll meet again in two hours. Until then keep me updated.”

~o~o~o~

“Parlez? Are you serious?” Terrence asked Rose on their way to Communications.

“It’s a bit Pirates of the Caribbean, yes, but they mentioned the Shadow Proclamation in their ultimatum. It’s worth a shot, Sir.”

He shook his head slightly. “I must be insane to even consider this. But if it helps to get the delegation back unharmed…”

Her boss opened the door to the communications centre and requested a confidential conversation with James Reilly, the head of the department. Ten minutes later they had their own communications console in a soundproof room.

Terrence pressed a button and began to speak. “This is the Torchwood Institute calling the Corrivexian fleet. We request parlez in accordance with the Shadow Proclamation.” Static silence followed his words. He waited a few minutes and repeated the message. Nothing.

“How are you, Sir?” she asked.

“I’ve been better,” her boss said, sounding like she felt.

“I’ll never get used to transmat beams.” She shook her head to get rid of the remaining cobwebs.

“You’ve done that before?”

“Yeah. The better the building is shielded, the dizzier I get.” She shuddered at the memory of the one that had transported her out of the TARDIS into a lethal version of The Weakest Link.

A few seconds later the door slid open and four heavily armed aliens entered the room, pointing weapons at them. “Lay your weapons down,” one of them said in the stilted, over-enunciated tone an automated translation system would produce. He gestured with his gun to emphasise his point.

Terrence nodded at Rose, and she complied. She knew the Doctor wouldn’t like that she was wearing a weapon, but it was Torchwood policy for field agents, and she had discovered that she liked the training. The way she had to concentrate on her breathing was almost meditative and cleared her mind. As a result she had become quite good, although she still hoped that she would never have to use her gun in earnest.

Her boss copied her motions and raised his hands. “We request an audience with your leader.”

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Rose wasn’t entirely certain but the alien in front of her seemed to be the one they had seen on the
second transmission. She guessed that he was probably a high ranking military officer, not the leader of the delegation. They wouldn’t risk him a second time.

The Corrivex regarded them for a couple of minutes in silence before he spoke. “I am the commander of this consular ship. You invoked the right of parlez. We will hear you.”

Like the alien that had met them earlier, his words sounded as if generated by an automatic translator. Having had the TARDIS translating for her, it always took Rose some time to get used to alien translation programmes. The speech pattern sounded weird, and the risk of unintentional misunderstandings was much higher.

Terrence bowed his head slightly. “We represent the Torchwood Institute. Our government asked us to negotiate the fate of our delegation,” he said by means of introduction, but since the Corrivex hadn’t given a name he didn’t give theirs either. It was part of the Torchwood policy for First Contact, although Rose thought it was rather stupid. But she had promised Pete that she would stick to the rules, and she did. At least most of the time, and only until she came across one that was simply wrong.

The alien stared at Terrence expressionlessly. “There is nothing to negotiate. Their lives are forfeit.”

Terrence stared back, without giving any indication that he had acknowledged the commander’s words or the meaning behind them. “You asked us to give our consent to the execution of our entire delegation. We respect your laws, but we ask ours to be respected as well.” He paused.

The commander nodded slowly. “Go on.”

“Before we can give you an answer to your request we would like to review the evidence that led to the verdict against our delegation.”

The alien was silent for about half a minute. “Granted.”

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The Corrivex they had met first took them to an empty room. “We will bring the evidence here,” he said and left.

Ten minutes later he returned, followed by two other aliens who were carrying boxes and what looked like two sets of advanced video equipment. “These are the recorded statements of the witnesses and surveillance tapes from the conference room,” he explained. “If you plug the players into these sockets the translator will convert the statements for you.” He showed them how to operate the system and left them alone.

Terrence took a seat and put the first tape with witness statements into the player. “I’ll take the statements, you take the CCTV tapes.”

Rose was almost forty minutes into the tapes when her breath caught. “Sir, you’ve got to see this,” she said, almost not recognising her voice. He came over, and she played the scene again.

“If I hadn’t seen this with my own eyes I wouldn’t believe it,” Terrence said eventually. “I knew the Vice President was an idiot, but why would he do something like that?”

Rose wasn’t convinced. “I dunno, something about this doesn’t add up. It just feels wrong. Let me watch it again.” She returned to the scene she had bookmarked earlier and played the sequence again. “See?”
“What do you mean?”

“The Vice President. The way he moves… It’s almost as if he had to think about every single move. Or as if someone else was directing his motions.”

“Maybe he’s just nervous,” Terrence suggested.

“No, I don’t think that’s it, Sir. I mean, he’s the Vice President. All things considered, this isn’t any different from meeting people with a completely different cultural background, and he’s met aliens before. Why should he be nervous?”

“But what else could it be? Do you think he has been forced?”

“I don’t know. I’m not sure, but it’s possible. And that would mean he’s innocent.” A smile lit up her face. “We could get them back!”

“Rose, I’m not ruling this out, but I think we need more to convince the Corrivex than just your gut feeling. Besides, we don’t even know that they would reverse a verdict.”

Rose nodded slowly. “What about the witness statements?”

“Nothing yet.”

“Can I help you, Sir?”

“Sure.”

Rose had only just put a tape into her player when a sound like distant thunder rolled through the ship, and the floor trembled briefly. “What was that?” she asked.

“Sounded like an explosion, a few decks below us,” Terrence gave back, getting up. He hadn’t even finished the motion when another group of heavily armed Corrivex entered the room.

“You are under arrest,” the leader said, pointing a gun at them.

Somehow Rose wasn’t surprised.

~o~o~o~

Donna cursed colourfully, and the Doctor looked up from the monitor he had been staring at.

“Something wrong?”

“I missed a step and twisted my ankle.”

The Doctor considered her appearance. She was looking as if she was dead on her feet. The crash must have been harder on her than he had thought. “Go to bed, Donna,” he said.

She glared at him. “Are you trying to send me away again?”

He glared right back. “You’ve been injured, and it won’t do us any good if you manage to break your neck by falling into a hole in the grating, just because you’re too stubborn to go to sleep when you’re tired.”

“It won’t do us any good?” she repeated, a merry twinkle in her eyes. “I thought we were talking about my neck?”
He raised an eyebrow. “Well, I thought the connection was obvious. I’d be the one who’d have to
tell your folks. And I don’t do families. Besides, what would I do without your tea?”

“Oi! If you think I’m only here to make tea…” she protested, interrupted by a huge yawn.

The Doctor gave her a pointed look.

“Alright, you win,” she said, as soon as she had stopped yawning. “I’ll go to bed. But no vanishing
on me, understood?”

As soon as Donna was gone the Doctor returned his attention to the console. Twenty minutes later
he connected the last two wires and pressed a button. The change of a status light told him that the
shields were up again, although that didn’t solve their other problems.

He leaned against the console, almost trembling with exhaustion. He still needed to repair the
dematerialisation circuit and the temporal stabilisers, and according to the diagnosis scan they were
lacking Thallium. The TARDIS had detected a source about twenty miles southeast, but one look at
the map had told him that just getting there would take him at least one day, and even longer if
Donna insisted on tagging along. He somehow doubted that she would stay in the TARDIS
willingly, and if he just left her there was no telling where she would end up.

Was it too much to ask for a companion who actually got the entire ‘Don’t wander off’ thing?
Sometimes he really missed K-9.

~o~o~o~

The guards led Rose and Terrence to the bridge, where the Corrivexian commander was waiting for
them. He glared at them accusatory. “You have caused a bomb explosion in the main engine room
that killed seven of our best crewmen and our chief engineer and destroyed our main drive almost
completely,” he stated.

“No!” Rose protested. “That’s not true! Why would we do that? We just want our delegation back
unharmed.”

“She is right,” Terrence added. “We would never do something like this, and certainly not under the
pretence of parlez. Despite what you might think we are honourable people, too.”

The alien considered them for a long time. “There is truth in your words. I believe you.” He had only
just finished his sentence when one of the deck aides appeared and whispered something in his ear.
His greenish skin paled a few shades and the marks on his head became more prominent. He thought
for a moment, and finally seemed to have reached a decision. “The explosion was worse than we
thought. We are drifting towards the gravitational field of your planet. In less than two hours we will
reach the point of no return.”

“Is there anything we can do to help?” Terrence asked.

“There have been many injuries,” the captain answered. “Our medical staff could need
reinforcements. I do not suppose you know anything about our technology?”

Rose shook her head. “Just a few basics about star ships in general, and I’ve only just begun my
studies in engineering.” Helping the Doctor cobble a few cables together while he was trying to build
a Delta wave and handing him tools to repair an ancient, sentient time ship that was probably beyond
anything this universe had ever seen didn’t really count, she thought.

“That is more than some of our remaining techs know. Besides, the laws of physics apply
everywhere in the universe. We would appreciate your help.”

Rose bowed her head slightly and decided against telling him that the laws of physics were a lot less universal than he thought. Especially when either Time Lord technology or parallel universes were involved.

He waved a deck aide nearer. “Take her to the engine room and tell the acting chief engineer that she has offered to help.”

Then he turned his attention towards Terrence who shrugged. “I’m just a soldier, but I’ve got basic medical training. Put me where you need me.”

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The engine room looked surprisingly Star Trek in Rose’s opinion, but then they all did, on every starship or space station she had ever visited. She had always wondered why that was. Looking around, she realised that she could actually identify which purposes some of the consoles served. The whole ‘If we don’t fix it, this power plant/star ship/space station is going to explode/crash/fall into the nearest black hole’ thing seemed to have rubbed off on her.

The deck aide introduced her to a Corrivex who had more delicate features than those she had seen so far. “Acting chief engineer, this is one of the humans who came aboard today. She says she has knowledge of our technology and has offered to help.” He bowed his head and left.

The engineer regarded her for a few seconds. “What do you know about our technology?” The tone of her voice made it immediately clear that she was a female, although there was no obvious difference in appearance, apart from the more delicate bone structure Rose had already noticed.

“About your technology, nothing really, but I’ve been on a couple of space ships from other species and I know a few basics. Just tell me what you want me to do.”

“The explosion destroyed almost every system that controls our main drive. Right now we are only operating on auxiliary engines. We have to restart the main drive before we get drawn too deep into the gravitational field, because otherwise we will not be able to reach escape velocity in time to avoid atmospheric entry.” The engineer stared at her intently, emphasising her next words. “This ship was built for deep space exploration, not for atmospheric flight.”

Rose understood. A shiver ran down her spine. “The ship would burn up as soon as you enter the atmosphere,” she concluded. “What can I do to help?”

“We will restart the engines at the latest possible moment before atmospheric entry, to give us time for repairs. That means we will have to use a different fuel mix, to compensate for the difference in atmospheric pressure. Do you know how to read schematics?”

“Yes.” Who would have thought that her attempts to figure out the dimension jumpers would come in handy that quickly?

The engineer handed her a tablet computer. “Our computerised fuel control system is gone, and we do not have the time to replace it. We have to change the configuration manually. I already calculated the correct values, and I want you to recalibrate the system accordingly. That would be on that console.” She pointed. “Change the plug-in boards, so they fit the schematics.”

Rose looked at the plans carefully, asked a few questions to make sure that she understood, then walked over to the console. She opened the first panel and set to work, systematically switching board after board according to the schematics. She worked slowly, double-checking everything she
did, knowing that any mistake could kill them. Almost half an hour later she finally closed the last panel and returned to the engineer.

“Anything else I can do?” she asked.

For more than an hour Rose helped with the repairs, too busy to even notice how time went by. Eventually the small group of crewmen and the other remaining engineers gathered around the acting chief engineer, who told the Corrivex to man the consoles, occasionally shouting commands. Slowly the engine room came to life, the status lights on the consoles lighting up. The low hum of electricity filled the room, although the almost imperceptible vibrations of the engines were still missing.

Having not received a specific task Rose stayed where she was, trying to keep out of the way. She glanced at her watch. Twelve minutes until atmospheric entry.

The acting chief engineer typed a few commands, then her hand hovered above a button for two or three seconds. She took a deep breath and pressed the button.

Nothing happened.
The acting chief engineer typed a few commands, then her hand hovered above a button for two or three seconds. She took a deep breath and pressed the button.

Nothing happened.

The engineer muttered what could only be a curse, then yelled a question at one of her colleagues.

“The plasma converters are fine,” the crewman gave back.

“And what about the fuel relays?”

“On-line.”

Looking at one of the technicians, the engineer ordered, “Check the wires connecting the capacitors to the power grid.”

He vanished and reappeared two minutes later. “Capacitors connected and working,” he reported, sounding breathless.

The engineer nodded, turned back to her console and pressed the button again, with the same result.

“What’s wrong?” Rose asked.

The chief engineer gave her a short glance, her concentration focused on the monitor in front of her. “The boosters do not have the necessary power to ignite, and without them we cannot start our main drive, but I have no idea what is wrong.”

“Something about the current?” Rose suggested tentatively while she tried to remember what her electrical engineering textbooks said.

“Maybe.” She typed a few commands and a schematic showed up on the monitor. On seeing it she muttered another curse. “The boosters need alternating current, and the only power source we had in reserve was one that just could generate direct current.” She closed her eyes briefly. “We do not have the time to install a DC-to-AC converter.”

Rose thought quickly. “How long would you need to have alternating current?”

“If we are very lucky, one change of direction would do.”

Rose took a deep breath. “This sounds probably completely silly, but would reversing the polarity of the neutron flow help?”

The engineer stared at her for a moment, an incredulous expression on her face.

“Okay, forget that I said anything,” Rose said, blushing.

A smile crept up on the other woman’s face. “No! That’s a brilliant idea!”

“It is?”
“Yes.” She began to enter commands. “If we time it perfectly, it could give us just enough power to launch the boosters, but we have to do it together. Push the button when I say ‘now’.”

Rose nodded, concentrating on the engineer’s actions. After another thirty seconds of programming the alien turned to her, her hand hovering above a key. Their eyes met.

“Ready? Now!” the engineer yelled.

Their hands moved in perfect synch, and suddenly a low rumble filled the room. Rose could feel an almost imperceptible vibration under her feet. The engine was working.

The technicians cheered, while the engineer briefly closed her eyes and Rose sagged against the console in relief.

“Good job, everyone,” the other woman said, and it looked as if she was about to continue her speech when she was interrupted by an announcement over the speakers. “Acting chief engineer to the bridge!”

The Corrivex looked at Rose. “You should come with me. You are the one who found the solution, after all. While I…” She paused for a moment and continued, “I found something else. And the commander is not going to like it.”

On their way to the bridge Rose was silent. She was a person who loved to get to know new people, and although she acknowledged that it was important to respect other people’s customs, she found the set of Torchwood rules for First Contact restricting. It had never done her any harm to just introduce herself. True, that didn’t count for the Doctor, but then he tended to piss off a certain type of person on a daily basis, she thought wryly. And the inevitable running that followed had never stopped him.

“My name is Rose,” she said eventually.

The engineer regarded her for some time, then said, “We are not supposed to tell our names to people who are not family. Our people believe that knowing a person’s real name gives power. But I don’t think you mean harm. My mother called me Dusa.”

Rose bowed her head, acknowledging the leap of faith it had been for the other woman to tell her. They followed the corridor in companionable silence, until Dusa asked curiously, “How did you know that reversing the polarity of the neutron flow would help?”

Rose shrugged, thoroughly embarrassed. “Actually I had no idea. My…” She hesitated for a moment, wondering what to call the Doctor. Everything she could think of seemed just wrong. He somehow defied definition, especially by human terms, and so did their relationship. She resorted to the only name she had ever known for him, hoping that this wouldn’t lead to questions she wasn’t ready to answer. “The Doctor told me that he’d done that, and I thought he was making it up.” She smiled at the memory.

The engineer looked at her incredulously. “Are you telling me you were just guessing?”

“Basically, yes,” Rose admitted, thoroughly embarrassed. This had certainly not been one of her wisest moves, even if it had saved them.

A slow grin crept up on Dusa’s face. “Do not worry, I would probably have done the same. My mother always said I took too many chances.”

Rose grinned back. “The Doctor thinks I’m jeopardy-friendly, although it’s mostly him who gets us
in trouble.”

“The Doctor? Is that the man who was brought aboard with you?” She paused. “I was in charge of
the transmat so I knew.”

“No!” God, the thought was embarrassing. “Terrence is my boss. The Doctor is… He’s not here,”
she finished lamely.

Dusa nodded slowly, clearly sensing that this was a topic Rose wasn’t keen to discuss. They
continued their way in silence.

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“Acting chief engineer, you saved us,” the commander said. “We will honour you appropriately
when we return home.” Rose saw Dusa bowing her head in acknowledgement. She had slipped
away as soon as they had entered the bridge and was now standing next to her boss.

“I wouldn’t have been able to do that without the help you sent me, Sir,” the engineer gave back.
“She deserves as much praise as I do.”

The commander turned his attention to Rose. “Thank you,” he said, and she bowed her head slightly.
Then he returned his gaze to the engineer. “How is our current status?”

She gave him an update and added, “Sir, there is something you should know. I found this when we
worked on repairing the main drive.” She held up a small disc with rather prominent scorch marks.
“The electronic signature hidden in the programming is unmistakable.”

He took the disc and inserted it into a reader, studying closely whatever the small monitor showed
him. His skin paled so much that the markings on his head appeared almost black. “You’re right.”
He pressed a button on one of the consoles. “Vice commander to the bridge!” His voice was cold.

They waited a few minutes in silence, the room filled with tension. A deck aide whispered something
in the commander’s ear, and he nodded curtly, his face becoming even more unreadable than it had
already been. Eventually the doors leading to the corridor slid open and a Corrivex in formal robes
entered the bridge.

“Vice Commander,” the commander greeted him. “The crisis has been averted. We are back in
orbit.”

“Good,” the other man gave back, sounding disinterested. “When are you going to execute the
delegation?”

“I gave them forty-eight hours. But I do not think that we will wait for an answer any longer.”
Rose gasped, and Terrence shot her a look.

“Will we not?” the vice commander asked.

“No.” The commander paused. “Because I know what happened and I will put an end to it
immediately.” He held up the disc. “Do you recognise this?”

The vice commander paled considerably.

“I thought so. A time fuse with your electronic signature. Not only that you forced me to issue an
ultimatum to innocent people by manipulating a member of their delegation. No, you also tried to kill
everyone on this ship, and possibly even more on the planet below. And what for? So you could limp back home in your little transporter and tell everyone how barbarian those humans were?” he shouted. Then he continued more calmly, but with utmost contempt, “Yes, I know that you spent the last few hours in your private ship. But what I do not know is why you did it, and how you made their Vice President attack our ambassador.”

The vice commander pulled himself up to his full height. “Look at you. Always sticking to the rules. Did you not see the reports? The people on this planet have got everything we need. And they are weak. We could just take it. Instead we grovel and ask for breadcrumbs.” He snorted. “Manipulating the Vice President was easy, especially since you were so nice and stopped on Gomlib. Their mind control devices are amazing, and so powerful. Placing all those explosives to destroy the main drive was much more complicated.” He paused briefly and gave the commander a hateful look. “It would have worked. This ship would have been destroyed, and our planet would have gone to war. Now we have nothing!”

The commander’s expression showed disgust. “We are honourable people. We do not declare war without having been attacked first, and we do not manipulate others to reach our goals. Vice Commander, you betrayed every single rule of the Great Charter. You will be tried in accordance with our laws.” He pressed a button, and four armed aliens entered the bridge. “Security Team, escort the former Vice Commander to the brig.”

Then the commander turned his attention back to Rose and Terrence. “Please take my sincerest apologies for the Vice Commander’s actions. Your delegation will be released and we will return you to your planet immediately.” His entire demeanour showed his embarrassment.

“Thank you.” Terrence bowed his head. “When we return I will suggest that our government enter into negotiations with you about the trade agreement you proposed.”

The commander looked at him in astonishment. “Why would you do that?”

“You said it yourself. You are honourable people. Not everyone would have acknowledged such a mistake, when a cover-up would have been so much easier. The least we can do is listen to your suggestions.”

The alien bowed.

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“You’re not going to prick me with that thing. What do you think I am? A pin cushion?” Donna protested.

The Doctor grinned at her, waving a hypo spray with a liquid version of the anti-radiation pills he had developed in his fourth life. “You’re certainly prickly enough for that.”

“Oi!” She swatted his shoulder.

“What was that for?” he asked, rubbing his arm.

“Oh, I think you know. But you’re still not giving me an inoculation.”

The Doctor sighed exasperatedly. “Donna, I can treat radiation poisoning, but I’d rather you didn’t get the symptoms in the first place. Without the inoculation you’re staying in the TARDIS.”

“But can’t we just avoid the area?”
“Donna, did you pay attention during the last couple of weeks? Things don’t always go as planned.” And he had the dim feeling that they wouldn’t this time, either. Not on Skaro. “Besides, this doesn’t even have a needle. You won’t feel a thing.”

“How stupid do you think I am? You’re telling me you’re going to inoculate me without a needle and that it won’t hurt, and you expect me to believe that?”

He rolled his eyes. “Like I said. Take the inoculation or stay here. And in that case I’ll tell the TARDIS to keep the doors locked. I really don’t fancy another rescue mission on this planet.” Especially not after what had happened last time, he thought. “Your choice.”

Donna grumbled something incomprehensible, then held out her arm.

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From a distance the rocks looked like a prehistoric animal that had been almost completely buried under the sand, leaving only the plates arising from its back visible. Coming nearer, the seemingly solid structure dissolved into a collection of enormous rocks, rising separately from each other. Eons ago seismic activity had formed this landscape, leaving the rocks as the only elevation within miles. The Doctor was standing at the edge of the largest rock, observing the rocky wastelands that stretched in front of him, while he waited for Donna to wake up. The sky was cloudless, and the rising sun cast large shadows over the ragged surface. It would be another hot day.

In the south he could see a small ridge of barren mountains, a camp at their foot. He briefly wondered what was going on there, then his eyes wandered on. Eventually he focused on an area that looked as if it had been destroyed by a fire. Nothing grew there, not even the kind of shrubbery that somehow managed to survive almost anywhere. The heat of the nuclear explosion had turned the sand into black glass, and the ground hadn’t yet eroded enough to provide an environment where botanical life was possible. Even if the radiation levels had decreased considerably since the explosion, spending large amounts of time in this area still wasn’t exactly advisable, though.

The Doctor turned slightly and stared in the direction of the TARDIS, the occasional twitching of his fingers the only indicator of his impatience. This journey had already taken them much longer than expected. Soon after they had left the ship they had discovered that the direct route was almost impassable. The detour had prolonged the journey by nearly ten miles, and they had only reached the Thallium source after more than three days. He had needed another day to collect enough Tallium to get the TARDIS working again, and an additional one to get them to the place where they had spent the night. By his estimation they would need another two days to get back, even if they kept the necessary breaks to a minimum.

He would have woken Donna as soon as the sun had begun to rise, but he knew she needed some time to recover. She was already at her breaking point, and they couldn’t afford her collapsing. He’d give her another quarter of an hour, but then they had to go. Something was coming, he could feel it. Although nothing seemed out of the ordinary, his instincts had been yelling at him for hours to get them back to the ship as soon as possible.

With a last look at the horizon he finally left his position on top of the rock and climbed down to the small camp. “Donna? Wake up.”

She slowly opened her eyes and muttered something, then her eyes focused on him with a deadly glare.

He shrugged inwardly, unperturbed by her expression. She had wanted to tag along, so she had to live with the consequences. “Come on, Donna. Less than twenty miles left. We’ll be back in the
TARDIS by tomorrow evening. I know you can do it.” It wasn’t exactly the St Crispin’s Day speech, but it would have to do. He held out a hand.

With a groan she took it and got up. “God, my back is killing me. Give me a minute.” She vanished around a spur of rock.

The Doctor began to build a small fireplace out of dry wood he had found earlier, waiting for Donna to return. By the time the tea was ready she still hadn’t reappeared. He gave her another three minutes, then got up and went in the most likely direction, looking for her. “Donna?”

No answer.

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Donna followed the rock face to the small creek the Doctor had discovered the evening before. Every step hurt, despite the comfortable hiking boots the TARDIS had provided. She was exhausted, filthy and wanted a real bed. Although she also wouldn’t say no to a cosy little bathroom with a tub, in which she could soak for at least two hours, or a spa.

After he had landed them on Teralix during a full-fledged monsoon, she had guilt-tripped the Doctor into a stay at a five-star spa (which had ended in running nonetheless). But she didn’t think that it would work this time, not when it had been her idea to tag along.

For a moment she sat at the brink of the creek, lost in thoughts. Without her the Doctor would have been much faster, he had implied as much. He might even have been back at this point. Hell, they might already have left the planet. Sometimes she really wondered why he had asked her to come with him in the first place. She was just a mouthy temp from Chiswick, after all, only good enough for making tea. With a sigh she opened her toilet bag and began her morning routine, well, as much of her morning routine as was possible in the middle of nowhere. The faster she returned to the small camp, the sooner they could be on their way back to the TARDIS.

She was packing away her tooth brush when she heard a faint noise. She listened for a few seconds, then shrugged it off and continued collecting her stuff. She had only just closed the bag when the noise repeated itself. It sounded almost like a scream. Gathering her bag she got up and followed the creek downstream, occasionally pausing to listen. After a hundred metres she was certain she was going in the right direction. The noises were getting louder, sounding more like words now, but she still couldn’t understand what they were saying.

Eventually she reached another rock, lower than the one where they had camped. She carefully glanced around a rock nose, and what she saw caused her to hold her breath. A bunch of aliens that looked suspiciously like pepper pots and three humans in greyish-black uniforms were pointing weapons at a group of nine or ten other humans, three of them children. Well, at least they looked human, although she had learned in the last couple of weeks that outward appearances could be deceiving. Just look at the Doctor, or that trader in medieval London.

What was going on here? The pepper pots seemed to work with the uniformed humans, but why did they threaten the other humanoids? Maybe the Doctor would have an idea, she thought, then a cold voice interrupted her musings. “Raise your hands.”

Slowly she followed the order, then turned around. Behind her stood a very young soldier, clad in the same greyish-black uniform the others were wearing, holding a weapon of a kind she had never seen before. He gestured with his gun. “Come on, join your group, or do you need a written invitation, Thal?” He sneered the last word.
Donna glared at him, but didn’t budge.

He raised an eyebrow in contempt. “Move, if you know what’s good for you, scum.” He pressed the muzzle of his weapon in her side, touching a spot that was still sensitive from the crash.

Donna barely managed to suppress a scream. “Oi! Sunshine, I don’t know who you think I am, but if you don’t stop threatening me then you’re gonna regret it!”

The soldier didn’t even bat an eye. “I would be very careful about my choice of words if I were you, Thal. There’s only one punishment for people who are incapable of following orders. Look!”

Donna returned her attention back to the small group of people. In an attempt to get away from the pepper pot aliens one of the adults tried to run. He had made it about thirty metres into the open plane when one of the pepper pots screeched something indistinguishable, the lights on its head flashing rhythmically. Then a beam of greenish light shot out of a protuberance, and the man fell to the ground without a sound.

“No! Oh my god, they killed him!” Donna was horrified.

The soldier shrugged. “Of course they did. He tried to escape.”

“That’s not a reason!”

He looked at her as if she was nothing more than a bug he’d crush under his boot without a second thought. “That’s more than enough of a reason. He’s nothing more than a Thal. Like you.” Raising his weapon he repeated his earlier command. “Move.”

The sudden menace in his voice sent a shiver down her spine. Without another word of protest she turned and followed the rock face towards the small group of people, the soldier behind her.

When she left the shadow cast by the rock nose, Donna paused briefly, trying to adjust to the sunlight.

“Come on, no dawdling, Thal. Our Lords and Masters don’t take it kindly if they’re kept waiting,” the soldier said.

“Your Lords and Masters? The pepper pots?” she asked disbelievingly.

Once again he pressed the weapon into her back, and she winced. “You will show all due respect. And be silent!”

Donna glowered at him, but didn’t say anything. Even she could understand a hint. Five minutes later they reached the group of people who had been looking in their direction for some time.

“I have captured another one,” the soldier announced. “She tried to hide.”

“Oi! I haven’t done anything,” Donna said. “I don’t even know who you are!”

One of the pepper pots turned in her direction, the lights on its head flashing once before it spoke. “The prisoner will be silent. You will obey the Daleks, or you will be exterminated!”

Suddenly Donna was very, very afraid.

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The Doctor watched the small group of humanoids being herded towards the camp at the foot of the
mountains with an inscrutable expression on his face. He made no attempt to hide his presence, even if his figure was clearly visible against the sky as he stood at the top of the rock. The Daleks had taken Donna, and it was his fault. He really should have locked her in the TARDIS. He observed the progress of the group with his binoculars until a small cloud of dust was the last visible indicator of their presence, then he put the device away.

For some time he stared at the open plane without actually seeing anything, his thoughts racing. It would take him at least twenty hours to get to the TARDIS, probably closer to twenty-four, and only if he didn’t have to stop for anything. Which included a companion who had to rest occasionally. The longer he thought about it, the clearer it became: Freeing Donna right now was completely out of the question.

He simply couldn’t fight off a bunch of pursuing Daleks, protect his companion and get them back to the TARDIS. Not without weapons and not in this terrain. And getting them back was the easy part, given the state the TARDIS was currently in. He needed at least a week, probably closer to two, just to get the most necessary repairs done so they would be able to enter the Vortex. He could count himself lucky if the Daleks didn’t detect the ship, because right now the shielding would maybe survive a single Dalek death ray, but never a combined attack.

He stared at the camp for a few more minutes while he made a decision. His eyes were devoid of emotion when he turned and left the rock for the last time. He would repair the TARDIS. He would get Donna back. And then he would deal with the Daleks as he should have done a long time ago.
Chapter Nine

Chapter Summary

Things get worse - for everyone...

A stone slipped under Donna’s boot and she stumbled, but she managed to keep her footing. One of the other women shot her a look. “They’ll kill you if you fall.”

“Who? The pepper pots or the soldiers?”

“Does it matter? The Daleks and the Kaleds, they’re the same,” the woman answered, her voice ringing with a mixture of fear and suppressed hate.

“But…”

“Silence!” one of the soldiers bellowed, and one of the Daleks turned his eye stalk in their direction.

The other woman shot her another meaningful glance, and Donna lowered her head. Maybe she would have a chance to get away from them at night after she had rested, but right now she was simply too exhausted to plan. The sun was burning down on them mercilessly and she needed a break, but by the looks of it she wouldn’t get one until they reached their destination. When the children hadn’t been able to walk any further, the soldiers had forced the adults to carry them, but they hadn’t let them slow down. Compared to this, the Doctor’s brisk speed seemed almost like a walk in the park. And he had allowed her a break when it was hottest.

The Doctor. He had to know by now that she had vanished. He would come, wouldn’t he? He wouldn’t just leave her behind. Not on another planet. Or would he? Why would he come for somebody who not only was completely useless, but had also managed to get herself captured? And he had said that he didn’t exactly look forward to a rescue mission. So what if…

She stumbled again, cursed and concentrated on the ground in front of her.

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When they finally reached the camp the soldier had spoken of, Donna was barely able to set one foot in front of the other. It had taken them almost a day to reach their destination, and now the sun was about to set. It was still freaking hot, and she longed for a bit of water. They stopped in front of a Nissen hut and the small group of humanoids huddled in the first shadow they had been allowed the entire day, while one of the soldiers politely knocked at the door. When it opened a distinguished looking humanoid appeared, wearing a uniform decorated with marks that indicated a higher rank.

“General, we rounded up the last group,” the soldier reported. “According to our scans all surviving Thals are now inside the camp.”

The general gave the small group of people a disinterested look. “Well done, Captain. Send them for processing. We don’t want to infest our work force with their germs,” he ordered in a clipped voice, then he disappeared back into the building.

The soldiers ushered the small group into another hut that looked slightly less rundown than the rest
of the camp, but to Donna’s relief the pepper pots stayed where they were. They had been giving her the creeps all day, especially whenever she remembered the Doctor’s explanation.

When she crossed the threshold she stopped briefly in surprise. The contrast to the exterior was even greater than the one she had experienced in medieval London. She was standing in a full-fledged medical facility, equipped with instruments that looked partly like those she had seen on shows on the telly and partly like those in the infirmary on the TARDIS. At the other side of the half-darkened room she could see a wooden door. She was contemplating making a run for it, when it opened and a man in a white lab coat appeared.

The soldiers forced them to stand in a line, and the man in the lab coat stepped in front of the first person, a woman of about forty. The scientist ran some sort of scanner over her until the device dinged, then a soldier dragged the woman outside. The man turned his attention towards the next person in the line and repeated the procedure. Eventually he came to a child, a girl of ten or eleven, and the woman Donna had talked to earlier suddenly rushed forward, grabbing the scientist at the arm. “Not my daughter! Do with me whatever you want, but spare her! Don’t make her go into the mines! Please! She’s so afraid in the dark!”

The scientist gave her a disgusted look, then jerked his chin at one of the soldiers who hit her with the stock of his gun. The woman doubled over, moaning. “Shut up, Thal scum!” the soldier ordered, raising his gun to emphasise his words. The woman fell silent, biting her lips to suppress another moan. She glared at the soldier, and Donna almost shivered at the hate in her gaze.

“Take the girl to the others,” the scientist commanded. “And mark the mother for special treatment.” Then he returned his attention to the other prisoners.

Donna had no idea what was going on, and truth be told, she didn’t want to find out. Right now all she wanted was to get out of here. Maybe she could get through that bloody door on the other side of the room, even if she didn’t know what she would find there. It couldn’t be worse than what was going on here, could it?

Two ‘dings’ later the scientist was scanning the man next to her, and she bolted, consequences be damned. She raced through the room and opened the door, only to stop dead as soon as she’d crossed the threshold. She barely registered the even more sophisticated scientific equipment, because her gaze got drawn towards the other side of the room. In the dim light she could see rows upon rows of large glass jars filled with greyish slimy mini-krakens, wailing like babies. Although they looked pretty harmless, their sheer presence filled her with an irrational fear. What were they?

“Daleks in their basic form. The future of our race. They are beautiful, aren’t they? Even a Thal like you must acknowledge that,” the voice of the scientist said from behind, and Donna jumped.

As soon as she’d found her voice again, she asked with more boldness than she really felt, “Someone hit you over the head, or what? Those are the most disgusting things I’ve ever seen!”

The scientist ignored her comment and nodded at a soldier to hold her, while he ran the scanner over her. She struggled against the grip, but in vain. The soldier was too strong.

A few seconds later the results came up. “Inconclusive.” The scientist considered her appearance and repeated the scan. “Fascinating. You look Thal, but the scanner says you aren’t.”

“Big surprise,” Donna commented sarcastically, trying to hide her fear. “I could’ve told you if you’d bothered asking.”

“But what are you? You aren’t Kaled either,” he stated, scientific curiosity in his voice. He took a
syringe from a table.

“What do you need that for?” she asked, her voice trembling slightly. Bugger. She hadn’t wanted him to know how scared she really was, but since the Doctor had told her what Lance had done to her she was afraid of anyone tampering with her body chemistry again. That had been the reason why she had fought the Doctor nail and claw when he’d tried to inoculate her, even if she knew rationally that he only wanted her best. But this was different, the Daleks in the glass jars told her as much.

“Oh, just a short look at your genetic makeup,” the scientist said.

“And you can’t just ask where I come from?” She was not going to let herself reduce to a trembling coward. She’d given the Racnoss Empress a piece of her mind, for god’s sake, she wasn’t going to let a needle intimidate her.

“Would you answer?”

She glared at him. “No.”

“I thought so.” He nodded at the soldier holding her and he straightened her arm, exposing the vein so the scientist could draw blood. He placed the sample in one of the machines on the table and typed a few commands.

A few seconds later the machine dinged and the results of the screening showed up on a monitor. “Interesting,” the scientist commented. He pressed a button and seconds later another monitor flickered to life, showing a face with greyish skin and a mark on his forehead that looked almost like a third eye.

“Doctor Gorran,” the man screeched, sounding almost like one of the Daleks. “Is the cataloguing complete?”

“Sir, we made a prisoner whose genetic makeup shows that she is neither Thal nor Kaled. I don’t know where she came from, but her DNA matches certain receptors of a sample we took from a person associated with the Doctor,” the scientist said. “She is definitely not Time Lord, but it is possible that she travelled with him. Her DNA shows traces of a sort of background radiation that is associated with… time travel? But that’s impossible!”

“The Doctor is an enemy of our species,” the man on the monitor declared, ignoring the last few words. “If we have his associate, he will come to us and he will be exterminated!” His voice almost cracked with excitement, then he seemed to calm down again. “Mark her for special treatment, but make sure she isn’t sent out with them just yet. We wouldn’t want to waste our bait.”

“Understood.” The scientist switched the monitor off and turned his attention towards the soldier holding Donna. “Take her to the miner’s quarters, as Davros ordered. She can work in the kitchen and make herself useful.” He paused briefly. “Until the Doctor meets his fate. Then we will find another use for her.”

~o~o~o~

Since Donna had first heard the soldier mention mines, she had wondered what it was about them. Ever since she had entered the camp she had looked for obvious signs of mining activities, like shaft towers or spoil piles, but hadn’t seen any. When the soldier dragged her to the miner’s quarters, she realised why. The entrance to the mines wasn’t a shaft but a tunnel built directly into the mountain, looking like the gaping jaws of a predator. The sheer sight was giving her the creeps.
She didn’t have to look at it long, though, because the soldier shoved her unceremoniously into a barrack. As soon as her eyes had adjusted to the darkness, she came to the conclusion that the definition ‘miner’s quarters’ was blatantly wrong. The room was filled with rather small bunk beds, filled with thin mattresses and threadbare sheets. About half of them were occupied by children between six and fourteen, the other beds were empty. Two or three of the children were staring at her with hollow, empty eyes. The stale smell in the room spoke of hunger and desperation.

Suddenly a siren blared and the children got up slowly, some of them rubbing their eyes with their fists, others groaning. Astonishingly, there wasn’t any grumbling about ‘five more minutes’ or sheets being pulled over heads, but what disturbed Donna most was that the chatter and the dawdling were missing. This was just not right.

The children queued in front of a long counter behind which three women filled bowls with thin soup. On closer look Donna recognised the one that had put up a fight for her daughter earlier, but she couldn’t see any of the other adults that had been brought to the camp with her.

The soldier pushed her in the direction of the counter. “Make yourself useful, scum.”

Donna turned around and glared at him. “Be careful with the name calling, idiot boy. You are taking orders from megalomaniac pepper pots and Doctor Frankenstein. You really don’t wanna know what I think about that.”

“Shut it,” the soldier sneered. “Or else you’ll regret that you’ve ever been born.”

She gave him another glare, but for once she decided to do the wise thing and stepped behind the counter, picked up a soup ladle and turned her attention to the girl in front of her. She could have been not older than ten, but her eyes were old, speaking of terrible things she must have seen. No child should ever have such eyes, Donna decided. When the girl held out her bowl Donna could barely suppress a gasp at seeing how gaunt her arms were, and the boy next to her was in no better condition. She filled the bowl with thin soup and handed it back to the girl. “Here, love.” She smiled in a desperate attempt to hold back tears.

Giving Donna one last look the soldier left the hut, shutting the door behind him. The noise that followed sounded like the door was being secured with a large bar.

About twenty minutes later the siren blared again, and the doors opened once more. The children got up, queued once more and marched towards the exit, dropping their bowls into a large box standing next to the door. As soon as the last of them had left the barrack another queue of children came in, covered with dust.

One of the women had introduced herself as Tellian while they had been giving out soup and told Donna that two of her own children were among those in the barrack. Now she was standing next to Donna, soundlessly moving her lips. Eventually the door fell shut, and she said calmly, “Two.”

“Two what?” Donna asked.

“Losses.”

“What do you mean, losses?”

“They went into the mines this morning, and two of them didn't come back.”

“But what does that mean?”

“It means that they didn’t come back.”

Seeing the expression of the other woman Donna was fairly certain she wouldn’t like the answer. She was right. “They’re dead.”

“They are dead? You’re just standing here and telling me that they’re dead?”

“What’s there to do? It happens. There are cave-ins, or firedamps or they don’t work fast enough and the guards shoot them.” Tellian still sounded remarkably calm.

Donna blinked a few times, unable to process what she was hearing. Then she exploded. “It happens? What the hell is wrong with you? Have you been brain-washed? They are children! They could have been your children! They shouldn’t even be here, let alone the mines, and you tell me that they die? Every day? And you don’t do anything about it? God, you make me sick!”

She turned around, stomped over to the box with used dishes and pulled it over to the sink behind the counter, then she began to wash the dishes with passionate fury. If she didn’t do something she was likely to wring a neck or two, and she was fairly certain that this wouldn’t help her situation.

After a while the woman who had been sent for special treatment earlier came over. She had introduced herself as Serra while they’d been serving soup. Now she picked up a towel and began to dry the dishes. “You’re right, we’ve got to do something,” she said grimly. “If I have to die, I won’t go like a coward. That’s not how my mother raised me.” She paused and continued after a few seconds, “You’re not from this planet, are you? I know you’re not Thal, and if you were Kaled you wouldn’t be here.”

Donna eyed her warily, uncertain if she really had found an ally, but willing to take the chance. Not that she had much of a choice, anyway. She made a decision and nodded. The scientist had already found out that much anyway.

“I’ve never met someone from another planet before,” Serra said. “My mother did, though. She was in the ministerial guard, back before the Daleks were even created, and then, on the day when everything changed, she met a man called the Doctor. He saved her life, and then he told her she had to fight. She never stopped, until the Daleks killed her.”

Donna stared at her in astonishment. “You’ve heard of the Doctor?”

“Do you know him? Is he here? On Skaro?” the other woman asked, a spark of hope kindling in her eyes.

Something about the other woman told Donna that she could trust her, that this wasn’t a trap. Glancing around to make sure she couldn’t be overheard, she nodded almost imperceptibly. “He’ll come, and he’ll stop this,” she said with as much conviction as she could muster, keeping her voice low. He would come, wouldn’t he? He had to. Although, judging by the condition many of the children were in he’d better hurry.

~o~o~o~

The air was thick with smoke and ash, the atmosphere so polluted he couldn’t even see the sky. The Doctor was standing on what had been a wheat field only days ago, before the Daleks had invaded Arcadia, and stared towards the capital. The once proud buildings had been reduced to smouldering monuments of a golden age, fallen to ruins. They had lost, although it had already been too late when he’d arrived. That was the norm these days. Always too late. Not good enough.

He kept his eyes focussed on the burning city, trying to avoid the destruction around him. People
were lying dead in the trampled crops around him. People he had come to know in these too short
days, learned about their dreams, shared their meals and their small tents. Ulric, who had been a
musician in another life and had cheered them up with songs; Dwine, who had wanted nothing more
than to finally marry his girlfriend; Reda, who reminded him of Ace with his ability to cook up
explosives from almost anything; Stine, the girl that could put the fear of the Eternals into her six
older brothers. All gone. Too late. Not good enough.

In an unconscious gesture he straightened the velvet of his jacket, absently noting a new cut and a
few burn marks on the fabric. He ran his hands through his hair, as always surprised to find the
chestnut curls gone, replaced by a severe soldier’s cut he’d given himself months ago and kept ever
since. He suspected he wouldn’t have the chance to grow them back, and asking the TARDIS to
repair the damages to his suit would just be a waste of valuable resources.

With a last glance at the city he turned around to return to his TARDIS. There was nothing left to do.
Arcadia was lost, the last bastion between the Dalek fleet and Gallifrey had fallen. It wouldn’t be
long now. He could feel it, deep inside. He was so tired. He had seen too much, done too much,
even without what was going to happen. He had known for months, but he had clung to that tiny
spark of hope deep in his hearts, that maybe, somehow he wouldn’t have to do it. He would have to
return to Gallifrey soon. The end was coming, and he hoped that it would be over for him then, too.
His eighth life should be his last.

He had only made a few steps in the direction of the TARDIS when something caught his eyes. A
crumpled figure was lying on the ground, clad in a vivid blue hoodie. A light breeze played with
strands of shoulder length hair, almost hypnotising him. He couldn’t tear his eyes away. None of the
people he had met in the last couple of days had had blonde hair and none would even have thought
about wearing such bright colours instead of their camouflage suits. Slowly he moved closer and
bent down, touching the still warm skin on her hand tentatively before turning the body around.

She looked at if she was sleeping, her eyes closed, her body unmarrred by weapons. Dalek death ray,
the analytical part of his mind informed him before he fully registered what he was seeing.

~o~o~o~

“Rose!”

The Doctor woke with a strangled gasp, crouched under the grating in the console room. His fingers
were clutching the sonic screwdriver as if it was the only thing connecting him to reality in a realm of
madness. He must have fallen asleep without even noticing, after almost three days of constant work
on the TARDIS and the lack of sleep in the previous week.

It had been so real. He could still feel the smoke in his lungs, the light breeze, discern the smell of
burnt flesh, almost as if he had been back to Arcadia, reliving events he had seen in his eighth
incarnation. So many lives had been lost that day. And then a vision of Rose had inserted itself into
the nightmare.

He gripped the sonic harder, feeling the ridges of the metal digging into his skin until he forced
himself to let it go. It clattered on the floor, glowing faintly. For almost a minute he stared at his
hands and willed them to stop trembling.

He could feel madness lurking in the darkest corners of his mind. It would be so easy to give in, to
just let go, stop thinking, stop fighting. But it had been a dream, he reminded himself. Rose was
alive, safe in another universe. He had seen her, held her. She was safe. She had to be. Because if
she wasn’t...
He closed his eyes for a few seconds that stretched into minutes and tried to pull himself together. Eventually he reached for the sonic and began to reconnect the last wires that linked the helmic regulator to the temporal stabilisers. Just one more hour to finish this part of the repairs, then he could focus on the dematerialisation circuit. Unfortunately that meant another four days before he could even begin to think about freeing Donna. Minimum. He hoped that she was still alive. She was far too stubborn to get herself killed just like that. And if he kept telling himself that he might actually believe it.

~o~o~o~

“Rose!”

Rose woke slowly, with the dreading feeling that something was very much not right, even if she didn’t know what it was. Throwing back the duvet, she padded over to the en suite to get a glass of water. She could have sworn that she had heard the Doctor, although she wondered why she hadn’t actually met him this time.

Looking into the mirror she did what she only ever did in the wee hours of the morning: admitting to herself how much she missed him. She hoped that he was alright. Well, as alright as someone could be while leading his lifestyle. Chances were that he had managed to get himself and Donna captured at least twice since she had last seen him. And he called her jeopardy-friendly.

A knock at her bedroom door interrupted her musings. “Rose?” Jackie’s voice asked. “Rose? Are you awake? We’ve got to go to the hospital. Now.”

“Mum? Is the baby…?” The question was interrupted by a groan. Rose didn’t even bother to finish the sentence. She grabbed a few clothes, dressed quickly and opened the door.

Jackie was leaning against the wall, clutching a bag. Her face was pale.

Rose took her arm. “Where’s Pete?”

“Conference in Geneva.”

He was not even born yet, but it seemed her little brother had inherited her mother’s lack of timing, Rose thought. Almost as soon as Jackie had found out that she was pregnant the doctors had told her that she was suffering from rhesus incompatibility. They had monitored her very carefully, but now it seemed they had run out of luck. Something was wrong, and now the baby was coming much too early. In a month or so Jackie would have moved to London, but now they were in the middle of nowhere, more than forty miles from a hospital equipped to deal with risk pregnancies. “Right. Let’s get you into the Jeep.”

Rose carefully manoeuvred Jackie down the stairs, every once in a while pausing to let her catch her breath. With the hand that wasn’t supporting her mum, she fished her mobile out of her pocket and called the hospital, then Pete.

After what seemed an eternity but couldn’t have been more than three minutes they reached the Jeep. She secured Jackie on the passenger seat and started the engine. While she steered the car over the narrow streets, Rose silently cursed the health system in this universe. The money went into the hospitals in the better parts of the larger cities, leaving the rest of the population cut off from state of the art medical care. The NHS had had its own failures, true, but at least there had been minimum standards.

Jackie’s voice interrupted her thoughts. “Rose.”
She had never heard her mum sound so frightened. Not with the Autons, not with the Slitheen, not when they’d found out what the ghosts had been.

“Yes, Mum?” She would never know how she kept her voice from wavering, but she sounded incredibly calm.

“Rose, I’m bleeding.”

Rose cursed again, loudly this time. She stepped on the gas, her eyes fixed on the street, occasionally glancing at the speedometer. The needle hit forty, then fifty. Normally she wouldn’t have dared to drive this fast on a street so narrow and especially not with her mum in the car, but she had no choice. She was not going to lose her mum and her baby brother. It just wasn’t going to happen.
Chapter Ten

Chapter Summary

Timing is everything...

Thirty-five minutes after they had left the mansion and broken more speed limits than Rose could count, she stopped with squealing tyres in front of Albion Hospital. Jackie’s gynaecologist, a nurse and two medics were already waiting for them.

During the last few minutes of the drive the contractions had come quicker and with higher intensity, and Jackie was still bleeding. Rose was worried, although she tried her best to keep her voice even while she gave the doctor an update on Jackie’s condition.

The medics helped Jackie out of the car and onto a gurney, then rushed her into the building. On their way to the labour ward Rose held Jackie’s hand, too worried about her mum to wonder why the layout of the corridors seemed familiar. “Come on, Mum. We’re almost there. Everything’s gonna be alright,” she said, not really certain who she wanted to convince more. She had never seen her mum like this, so frightened, and it was scaring her more than she wanted to admit.

Having reached their destination, the gynaecologist performed a thorough examination, occasionally exchanging glances with the nurse. Something was wrong, Rose was certain of it, but the doctor and the nurse were trying to keep it to themselves. Since panicking wasn’t going to help, Rose refrained from asking questions that would only worry her mum, and kept murmuring reassurances to her.

Eventually the doctor seemed to have reached a conclusion. “Mrs Tyler, you will need a C-section,” the woman said matter-of-factly.

“Is... the baby...?” Jackie managed before another contraction hit her. She groaned and gripped Rose’s hand so hard that it felt like her fingers were going to break. Rose could barely suppress a scream.

“His heart rate is slowing. It’s possible that he is reacting to the new medication we gave you last week. This is completely unprecedented. I’ve never heard of a case like this,” the gynaecologist explained. “I don’t even know what exactly is happening, but a C-section is the only way to save his life.”

“But he’s still so small...”

The doctor took her other hand. “Mrs Tyler, I’m not going to lie to you. It’s risky. I would be much more optimistic if he was three weeks older. But he will at least have a chance.”

Jackie still didn’t look convinced. “What if we wait? Just until Pete is here...”

The gynaecologist shook her head. “If we wait much longer, his heart will no longer be able to bear the stress. We don’t have a choice.”

“But...”

“Do it, Mum. Everything will be fine,” Rose interrupted her, squeezing her hand. “Believe me, I
know.” And somehow she did. Something deep inside that had just woken up told her that it was going to be alright. She didn’t even know where this certainty came from, but she knew that she was telling the truth.

Jackie looked at her, taking in her expression, then nodded slowly. “Do it.”

The gynaecologist spun into action, giving commands to organise an operating room and to prepare Jackie for the surgery. Five minutes later Rose found herself alone in a waiting area, staring at the doors that had closed behind the gurney with her mum, wondering what was happening.

Eventually the doors opened again and the gynaecologist reappeared. Rose was completely unable to tell how much time had passed. She looked at the woman standing in the door, waiting for her to answer a question she didn’t want to ask.

“Ms Tyler, your mother and your little brother are both fighters. They are fine, but only because you got them here so fast. Do you want to see them?”

A smile slowly spread on Rose’s face. “Please.”

~o~o~o~

He will come. He has to.

Giving out soup to almost starved children.

He will come. He has to.

Watching them walk into the mines and wondering if all of them would return.

He will come. He has to.

Holding a boy while he cried himself into sleep.

He will come. He has to.

Donna leant heavily against the counter, thoroughly exhausted. She had been here for four days now. Every day Serra and she had gathered more information about where they were, what was going on, the schedule of the guards, but everything they heard made it abundantly clear that it was next to impossible to escape on their own. Oh, they could try, of course, but that would end at an electrical fence or in front of a Dalek death ray faster than she could type ‘bad idea’ on a mechanical typewriter.

Four days. Four days without a sign of the Doctor. She didn’t know how much longer she could bear this. The mantra that kept repeating itself in her head was about the only thing keeping her upright. Because it was true. He would come. Despite his off-putting demeanour he wouldn’t just leave her behind. He would grumble and call her stupid for getting herself into this situation, but he would come. Until then she would do everything in her power to help.

~o~o~o~

When the door to the barrack opened in the afternoon of the sixth day, it came almost as a shock. Apart from the time during the mornings and the evening shift changes the doors were always closed. For once the dark room was lit by sunlight that fell through the entrance, leaving a bright rectangle on the floor. A few seconds nothing else happened. Donna and Serra exchanged glances, not entirely certain what to make of this. Then the perfect rectangle was destroyed by the appearance
of the distinctive shadow of a Dalek.

The alien entered the building without a sound, accompanied by four Kaled soldiers. It slowly rolled towards the counter, stopping in front of Donna. It seemed every single person in the entire building was holding their breath.

“You will follow!” the Dalek commanded, for the first time breaking the silence that had descended on the room.

Donna winced, but she didn’t move. Enough was enough. This had been going on for far too long. She just couldn’t bear it anymore. If the Daleks killed her, then so be it, but she was not going to die like a coward in the dark. “And why would I want to do that?” she asked sarcastically.

“You will obey or you will be exterminated.”

She crossed her arms. “And how exactly is that different from what you’re planning anyway?”

The Dalek ignored her comment and turned its eyestalk to Serra. “You will follow, too.”

Donna exchanged another glance with Serra. She had no idea what was going on, but whatever it was, it was not good. This would be the perfect time for the Doctor to show up.

Unfortunately they were fresh out of miracles. Instead of the Doctor appearing in the door frame, one of the Kaleds grabbed her and Serra and dragged them out of the building.

When the sunlight hit her, Donna squinted briefly, but despite the ruthless grip of the soldier she turned towards the glaring sun, enjoying the warmth. She hadn’t seen so much light in days.

After a few seconds she tugged at the arm that was pulling her along. “Oi! You! Leave me alone! I can walk on my own, you know!”

The soldier shot her a look of complete disinterest. “You will be silent.”

“Or else you’ll exterminate me. Yeah, heard that one before,” Donna said with as much sarcasm as she could muster. “Your threats would be much more impressive if they were more believable.”

The guard raised an eyebrow. “No, we’ll shoot your friend,” he gave back coolly and waved at the soldier who was holding Serra.

The other man raised his weapon, and Donna relented.

Minutes later the two women found themselves in a prison cell in one of the very few stone buildings. Donna collapsed on the small bed and looked at Serra. “Any idea what’s going on?”

The other woman shook her head and opened her mouth to answer, only to be interrupted by a distant scream. After a few seconds the noise repeated itself, and a shiver ran down Donna’s spine. She had the dim feeling that they were going to find out what exactly ‘special treatment’ meant.

~o~o~o~

The Doctor closed the last panel on the console, got up and typed a few commands. Within seconds the last three status lights on the console changed from blue to green. He released a breath and his shoulders sagged in relief. The dematerialisation circuit and the temporal stabilisers were working again, even if it only was for a few short jumps. Then he would need to send them into the Vortex and stay there until his ship had healed completely.
He flipped a few switches, turned a dial and pulled a lever, his face expressionless while the TARDIS dematerialised for the first time in two weeks. For now his course of action was clear. Free Donna and end this. For good.

~o~o~o~

Donna heard the signal that announced the change of shift twice before the door to their cell opened again. Doctor Gorran appeared in the doorframe, accompanied by two soldiers.

“Miss Noble, if you would be so kind to follow us,” he said. “There are some questions concerning the Doctor that need answering.” He paused briefly. “Yes, Miss Noble, we know you travelled with the Doctor. Thanks to your little friend over there.”

Donna looked at Serra who met her gaze without hesitation, then she crossed her arms and turned her attention back to the scientist, staring at him with contempt. “Do you really think I’d fall for that? One of the little wimps in the barrack must have overheard something and told you.”

The Kaled feigned surprise. “Oh, very good. But I should have known. The Doctor doesn’t travel with fools.”

“And you can drop that ‘proud teacher’ attitude, too. So, get on with it. We wouldn’t want your torturer to get bored, would we, Serra?”

“Of course not,” the other woman said with cutting irony. “He might actually do something useful and throw himself from the nearest cliff.”

“No need for sarcasm, Thal!” The scientist spit out the last word. “Remember, we have your daughter, and we could always leave her to the hunters.”

Donna felt sick. She had learned fast that being left for the hunters was just an euphemism for being Dalek bait.

The other woman blanched and was silent for a while. “Whatever I do, you’re going to kill her anyway, one way or the other,” she said eventually, her entire body trembling.

“Serra…” Donna began, but her friend interrupted her, this time sounding stronger. “No. They’d try to use her against me no matter what. They always do this, whenever they find a weakness. And if you give in once…” She straightened. “It doesn’t matter. They’ll kill us anyway. All of us.” She gave the scientist a hard look.

Doctor Gorran met her gaze, then gestured at the guards. “Take them to the interview room.”

~o~o~o~

The interview room looked nothing like the one Donna had seen in a police station once or the ones they showed on the telly. It was rather large, with sophisticated electronic equipment lining the greyish walls. Two gurneys were standing in the middle of the room, wires connecting them to the equipment. At the end of each wire was something that looked suspiciously like electrodes. A man in a lab coat was adjusting some settings on the equipment, every once in a while looking something up in a manual. What was missing in the room was a table with chairs. The sick feeling in Donna’s gut grew stronger.

“Secure them,” Doctor Gorran ordered, and one of the guards dragged Donna over to the left gurney, while the other pulled Serra to the one on the right. Donna struggled against the grip of the soldiers, but to no avail. Within two minutes she was secured on the gurney, and the scientist
fastened the electrodes around her head and body.

“So, Miss Noble. Let’s talk a bit, shall we?” He smiled at her like a greedy hyena, and Donna had never been so frightened before. “Let’s begin with something simple. What are you?” His face conveyed genuine curiosity.

“What do you mean, ‘What are you?’” Donna asked, confusion written over her face.

“You travelled with the Doctor but you aren’t his species. We have seen your species before, but we weren’t able to identify your origin. So, what are you?” he repeated.

After a few seconds of consideration she snapped, “Human.” It couldn’t hurt to tell him, could it? Without the intergalactic coordinates (or whatever they were called) he could search the entire galaxy for her home planet without ever finding it.

“Very good, Miss Noble. That was easy, wasn’t it? And now tell me about the Doctor.” He looked her in the eyes.

Donna stared back, not even blinking. “No.”

“Let me tell you, Miss Noble, that it is a really bad idea not to answer my questions. Things might get a lot less pleasant than they are now.”

Looking down at the belts securing her body and casting a glance towards Serra who was in a similar condition, Donna snorted, but didn’t answer.

“As you wish.” The scientist nodded at the other man in the lab coat who switched a lever on one of the consoles.

A tingle began to wander over Donna’s skin, like crawling ants, and quickly became more and more irritating. She tried to remove the imaginary insects, but she couldn’t move a single limb.

“I’m waiting, Miss Noble.”

“I said no,” Donna gave back. The tingling feeling got stronger, even more unpleasant.

The scientist looked at her as if she was one of the imaginary insects crawling over her skin. “I’m a patient man. You will tell me. Sooner or later. You see, the tingle will increase until it becomes unbearable. And then you’ll beg me to listen to everything you’ve got to tell me, or you’ll go insane.”

Doctor Gorran turned towards the man standing by the console, and he adjusted one of the controls. Then the scientist turned back to Donna. “Let’s try again. Tell me about the Doctor.”

“He’s an alien,” she snapped.

“Thank you, but we already knew that,” Doctor Gorran commented sarcastically. “Tell me what he is doing here.”

“I don’t know!” Donna said, her voice getting louder in an effort to stifle a groan. The tingling was becoming more and more painful.

“Don’t lie to me, Miss Noble. You’ll regret it!” the scientist threatened.

“But I don’t know. He just said that we were going to crash.”
At another nod the man in the lab coat adjusted another control, and the tingle changed into the feeling of thousands of needles piercing Donna’s skin. It was excruciating, and she could barely suppress a scream.

“I ask you again, why did you come here? The Doctor always has a plan. We know that. So don’t think you can fool me into believing you came here without a reason!” he said, his voice rising with every word.

“I already told you, I don’t know!” Donna yelled back, unable to hold back longer. The pain was increasing by the second. She writhed against the restraints but still couldn’t move.

“Oh, but I think you do,” the scientist said, suddenly calm again, and turned to the man in the lab coat. “Turn the machine off and leave us alone.”

The man typed a few commands, and the immediate pain stopped, only to be replaced by shaking muscles. Without another word the man left the room. As soon as the door had closed, Doctor Gorran faced Donna with a hard look. “What you’ve experienced now was only a fraction of the pain this machine can cause. You’ll tell me everything you know. Sooner or later. And believe me, we’ve got time.”

With an effort Donna kept her face straight. Even if the pain had stopped she was fairly certain that things would only get worse, and she didn’t know how much longer she could bear it.

Then he turned to pull another lever on the console, but his fingers had only just touched the metal when a voice with a distinctive Northern accent said, “I really wouldn’t do that if I were you.”

“Doctor!” The relief in her voice was evident, but even so Donna would never admit to anybody how close she had come to giving up.

He sent a reassuring glance in her direction but ignored her otherwise, his eyes fixed on the man who was about to pull the lever. “Really, I wouldn’t.”

The scientist turned his attention towards him. “Doctor! Finally we meet each other. I’d like to say that the pleasure is all mine, but as you can see the moment is most inconvenient.” He gestured at Donna and Serra who were still fixed on the gurneys.

The Doctor leant against the wall and crossed his arms. “Admittedly I’ve got a history when it comes to awful timing, but this I’d call ‘just in time’.”

The scientist smiled like a hyena once more. “Well, I’d say that’s a question of perspective.” He moved slowly towards the console, until he could almost touch the metal. “Anyway, why wouldn’t I pull the lever?”

“Oh, mostly because the lever will explode a rather impressive amount of Nitro Nine I connected to the life support system in your breeding room.” The Doctor was a picture of nonchalance. “Even if Nitro Nine is not the most reliable of explosives, do you really wanna take the risk of destroying an entire generation of your precious Daleks?”

Doctor Gorran looked at the man in leather, and whatever he saw in the Doctor’s face seemed to persuade him that he wasn’t bluffing. He stepped back from the console. “You know that calling for help is all I have to do to get you arrested, don’t you?” he asked casually.

The Doctor raised an eyebrow. “Do you take me for an idiot?” He uncrossed his arms and straightened, glaring at the scientist. “Do you really think I’d leave you the opportunity to call one of your little Dalek friends?”
The power he suddenly exuded and the hatred in his voice made Donna shiver involuntarily. Then he pushed himself away from the wall, crossed the room with three long steps and pointed his sonic screwdriver at the bonds holding Donna.

The shackles released and Donna slowly sat up, rubbing her wrists. Angry red welts were slowly developing on her arms, and she had the feeling they’d hurt like hell later. Right now she was just too angry to feel anything else. Angry at the Daleks, the scientists, the Doctor, herself.

She turned her attention back to the scientist. For more than a minute the sheer presence of the Doctor had been enough to freeze him, but now he tried to move towards the console once more, while the Doctor was releasing Serra from her shackles.

Donna jumped from the gurney, bit back a scream when her aching muscles announced contact with the hard concrete and mounted herself directly in front of the man in the lab coat. “I really wouldn’t do this if I were you, sunshine. After the last few days you’re not rating high on my personal list of favourite life forms, and you don’t want to find out what I do to people I despise.”

“I’d listen to her if I were you,” the Doctor said from behind, his words accompanied by the clunk of metal on concrete. “She slaps.”

Then Serra appeared next to her, her own shackles in her hands. “Let’s see how these look on him, shall we, Donna?”

“Sure.”

The two women grabbed the man, while the Doctor rewired the console. To what purpose, Donna had no idea. Three minutes later Doctor Gorran was secured on Donna’s gurney and the Time Lord reset the last connections. Then the group left the room, leaving the scientist behind without a second glance.

Outside, the Doctor turned to Serra. “In about half an hour I’ll start a diversion that’ll get the guards away from the barracks. Do you think you can get the children out on your own?”

She nodded. “But what about the children in the mines?”

The Doctor grinned suddenly. “What do you think is the diversion?”
Hiding behind a ventilation shaft that led to the mines, the Doctor observed the landscape in front of them. Everything was quiet, and the guards and even the single Dalek in front of the barracks looked extremely bored, even if the Doctor was fairly certain that this would change soon.

“So, this is what’s gonna happen. The children will be deep in the mines, in an area far from the entrance, but most of them will be near one of the ventilation shafts, if only because the Kaled guards have to breathe, too.” His voice dripped with sarcasm on the last part of the sentence.

He paused briefly and looked at Donna. Even if she was exhausted she had made it abundantly clear that she would help him to free the children. “Here’s the plan: I go down into the mine and get those children out, you send them into that valley over there. Serra told me that there’s a narrow cave at the end of a foot path, that’ll give them protection until we end this, then they can hide in the mountains.”

Donna looked down the shaft, apparently not entirely convinced that his plan would work. Admittedly he had forgotten, well, chosen not to tell her a few things. The less she knew the more likely he could do what he had to do without her lecturing him about the dangers and the inevitable problems with his plan. At least she didn’t give him the odds, like K-9 would have done.

Unfortunately he hadn’t taken into account Donna’s penchant for pointing out the obvious. “But how are you going to get the children up here? Last time I looked none of them had wings. And it seems the Kaleds conveniently forgot the ladder when they built this shaft.”

“Corded ladder,” he told her with a triumphant grin and pulled the item in question out of his pocket. A bit of rummaging when he had short-circuited the console in the interrogation room had reminded him of the old corded ladder he had stored there ages ago. He’d completely forgotten that it was there and he certainly wasn’t going to tell Donna that he’d already had it when they’d been imprisoned in the Tower. In that case the slap he had received back then would most likely seem like a light summer breeze compared to a tornado.

“How did you fit that in there?” she wanted to know.

He sighed. It seemed he had also forgotten Donna’s ability to focus on something mostly unrelated to the task at hand. “Donna, I travel on a ship that’s bigger on the inside. You’d think my people would have managed to do that with something as simple as pockets as well.”

“But what about the weight? Do you have to carry that, too?”


“Git,” she snapped, her eyes suddenly blazing with a mixture of fury and fear she had suppressed far too long. “I was in that camp for a bloody week! I’ll never forget what happened there, the children
that died, of hunger, of abuse, of sheer home-sickness. That was the worst. So many of them just
gave up, like that little boy a few days ago. He wasn’t even eight. He didn’t even fight it, just faded
away. You don’t have to remind me that we have to get them out of here.”

Donna turned away from him, wiping her eyes with angry movements. After a few seconds she had
calmed down, even if there were still tears standing in her eyes. “Right. Even with your corded
ladder it’ll take the children some time to get up here. What about the guards in the mines? Won’t
they suspect anything?”

The Doctor winced. The way Donna had changed the topic was worse than any wild accusation
would have been. He’d even prefer the slap, and he was fairly certain he deserved one, although he
couldn’t see what he could have done differently. At the moment his TARDIS was far too unstable
to even try an accurate time jump, so he had had no choice but to move in linear time. Which meant
that he had left Donna to the Daleks for over a week.

Instead of doing what he should have done — give Donna the comfort she needed after all she had
gone through — he did what he always did: He took her opening and changed the topic. “Nah. The
guards will be busy elsewhere…”

Donna nodded slowly while he explained the rest of the plan.

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The loud thud of a heavy boot on tamped soil told the Doctor that he had reached the bottom of the
shaft. It had taken him less than two minutes to reach the ground, much to his own surprise. But then
the layout of the mines would most likely follow the deposit of Dalekanium that ran through the
mountains like veins, sometimes nearer to and sometimes farther away from the surface. In this case,
nearer.

This part of the mines was completely dark and seemed to have been abandoned some time ago,
probably because the output of ore had been too low. Which meant that he wouldn’t find the children
here, but it was also quite unlikely that he would run into a guard anytime soon. He was fairly certain
that the children would be working at the end of the drift, away from the entrance, while the most of
the guards would spend their time in the older, outer parts of the mines, avoiding the dust and the
dirt. At least this was what he was counting on.

From a distance the Doctor could hear the constant sounds of rubble on metal, indicating the
direction where he would find the children. He followed the tunnel and tried to get an impression of
the layout of the mines. The drift mostly followed the deposits of the Dalekanium, building a maze of
intersecting tunnels on more than one level. Whenever a tunnel touched a cave situated on a lower
level, there were holes in the rock so he could observe what was happening below without being
seen. Most of the caves were empty and some served as storage areas, but there was no sign of the
children in the first dozen caves. By the looks of it they were working in only one spot, which would
make everything much easier. He kept searching the mine systematically, and finally he found what
he was looking for.

More than fifty feet below, children of all ages were digging in the dirt for ore, loading wagons,
sending them on their way out. It looked like a coal mine at the height of the industrial revolution on
Earth, only worse. Two Daleks were directly beneath him, from above almost hidden by a spur of
rock. Their sheer presence intimidated the children, and he could see that they avoided the Daleks as
much as possible, almost forming a semicircle around them.

Kaled soldiers were everywhere, pushing the children on. When a boy who could not have been
older than ten seemed to slow down, a soldier hit him with the butt of his weapon, cursing him
loudly and threatening his friends. The boy tried to move faster, but stumbled over an unevenness, scattering the ore he was carrying, barely managing to stay on his feet. The soldier shoved him once more, and the boy fell on the ground, crying out.

“Get up, scum!” the soldier ordered.

The boy tried to follow, but when he put weight on his left arm he couldn’t suppress a scream. He repeated the motion, but he still couldn’t get up.

“I’m not saying it again, Thal! Get up!” The soldier raised his weapon, the motion alerting one of the Daleks below, and it turned its eyestalk at the scene.

“I can’t! I tried. I really, really did, but I can’t! It hurts too much!” the boy sobbed, tears running over his face.

“Then you are no longer useful,” the Dalek declared, turning its weapon at the child.

The Doctor leant against the corridor and closed his eyes. He knew what was going to happen, and it was making him sick, but there was nothing he could do without endangering the mission.

The boy sobbed louder. Then the sound was suddenly cut off by the unmistakable sound of a Dalek death ray. Deadly silence settled in the room. Apparently the children didn’t even dare to move.

“What are you waiting for? Get back to work, or you’ll suffer the consequences, too,” one of the Kaled soldiers said coldly, interrupting the silence.

After a few seconds the shuffling of small feet told the Doctor that the children were following the order. He clenched his fists. Too late again, at least for the child that had just died. And how many others had it been since the Kaleds and the Daleks had begun to enslave anyone who didn’t share the same genetic make-up? Too many, even if he only took into account this planet’s linear timeline.

Deep in the darkest parts of his mind a storm began to build, but he couldn’t give in. Not yet. There were still things he had to do first. And that meant that the children would have to wait for a few more minutes, too.

He made his preparations and continued his way through the mines. As he came nearer to the entrance he eventually reached a large cave that was lit by mercury vapour lamps. Several tunnels ended here, but this cave was the only way to the main entrance of the mines. A bottleneck. Perfect.

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“Stop!”

Serra cursed inwardly. How could she have been so stupid and let herself be discovered before she had even reached the barrack? By a lone soldier? She clutched the wooden club she had picked up earlier and thought quickly. If she could knock the soldier out she still had a chance.

“Drop the club, then turn around,” the soldier ordered. “Slowly.”

She did what he said. Well, partly. Only she moved fast and she didn’t drop the wood in her hands. It hit the soldier’s head with a thud and he collapsed, dropping his gun. Without hesitation she restrained him with two cords she found in his pocket, gagged him with his handkerchief and dragged him out of sight. Then she picked up his gun.

When she had almost reached her goal, Serra hid in the shadow of the nissen hut that was nearest to
the barrack. Observing the barrack in front of her, she wondered if a disguise would buy her more
time. If she dressed as a Kaled… Then she decided that it didn’t matter. The guards would recognise
her as a Thal anyway, even if she was wearing a Kaled uniform. She needed the Doctor’s diversion.
Now.

She had barely finished the thought when she heard a sound like distant thunder. Turning her head
towards the mountain, she could see faint dust lines rising from the entrance of the mines.
Unfortunately the guards in front of the barrack doors and the Dalek accompanying them didn’t seem
to have noticed that something was going on. Then the noise repeated itself, and this time the Kaled
soldiers guarding the barrack stopped and stared at the mountain. When she followed their gazes she
could see the reason: A part of the mountain side had simply vanished, and it looked like the entrance
to the mines had been buried. For a brief moment she closed her eyes, thought about the children in
there and desperately hoped that the Doctor knew what he was doing.

Then the loudspeaker system came to life. “To all Kaled soldiers: Gather at the main entrance to the
mines. The Dalek forces will remain where they are. This is not an exercise.”

Without hesitation the guards left their posts. Serra groaned inwardly. The Doctor’s plan — if it had
been his plan — had failed. There was still a Dalek guarding the barrack, and it — she refused to
think about them as living beings — was more than enough to stop her from freeing the children. But
she had to try, even if it might cost her own life. For her daughter.

Serra closed her eyes and gathered her courage. Desperately clutching the gun she waited until the
Dalek turned its eyestalk in the opposite direction. She crossed the open space between her hiding
spot and the Dalek in less than three seconds.

The Dalek swung his head around, turning his eyestalk at her. Without even thinking about it Serra
raised her weapon, aimed at the single eye and pulled the trigger, then jumped aside.

The Dalek turned and fired in the direction where she had been moments before, but missed her.
Serra raised the gun once more, this time aiming for what looked like a weld joint between the
armour protecting the upper part of the Dalek’s body. Somehow (and she suspected she was simply
lucky) she managed to break the shell, only to freeze in disgust. Something she could only describe
as a slimy mini-kraken wired into the machinery became visible on the inside. That had to be what
Doctor Gorran had called their basic form, she thought.

The thing inside the shell wailed briefly, then it raised one of its tentacles to manipulate one of the
wires. Before it could move its limb more than a few millimetres Serra fired again, aiming at what
seemed to be the head of the life form.

For a second she simply stared at the dead Dalek in its protective shell, then she raced to the barrack
doors and lifted the heavy bar that locked the doors.

Sunlight fell into the dark room in front of her, revealing dozens of faces staring at the entrance in a
mixture of shock and astonishment. Then a voice interrupted the silence. “Mummy!”

“Bettan!” Serra spread her arms and her daughter threw herself at her.

“Serra, is that you?” one of the women in the room asked, still squinting at the bright light. “What
happened?”

Serra explained quickly, still enfolding her daughter in her arms. Murmuring filled the room.
“… And what do you think we should do now?” asked an older boy, who had always been one of the
leaders among the children.

“We can hide in the mountains. The Daleks are not that manoeuvrable in difficult terrain. They’ll never catch all of us,” she said, trying to sound as optimistic as possible.

The boy nodded slowly, eyes far older than his age suddenly showing hope. “What’s your plan?”

Looking at the people in front of her, Serra could see the emotion mirrored on more than one face. She opened her mouth, but before she could answer another woman objected, “But it’s dangerous!”

Suddenly Serra was incredibly furious. “Do you really think you’re safe here?” she gave back sarcastically. “What do you think the Daleks will do to you in the end? But it’s your decision: Come or stay here.” She stared at the door for a second, then straightened herself. “We don’t have much time. It’s only a matter of minutes until a Kaled or a Dalek see the open doors, but now their attention is on the mines. If we’re careful we can hide between the huts until we reach the edge of the camp. There’s a path near the northern corner that’ll lead us into the mountains.” She stared at the prisoners intently. “So, what do you say?”

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The Doctor stopped for a second to clear dust from his leather jacket. Apparently his leftovers of Nitro Nine were of surprisingly good quality, because it seemed he had, well, slightly overestimated the necessary amount. By the looks of it, he’d not only caused a diversion but also nearly managed to bring down the tunnels in this part of the mines. So he every now and then had to clear the way from rubble, and even if it was only a few hundred metres, it took him almost ten minutes to return to the part of the mines where the children were working.

When he finally reached the bottleneck he had discovered earlier, he turned his sonic screwdriver at the time fuse. Five minutes should be enough, he decided.

Two minutes later he reached the ground level of the cave where the children were working. For a second he stood in the entrance, observing the Dickensian nightmare going on there. Nothing had changed, nothing indicated that a child had died here only minutes ago. And the Daleks were still under the spur of rock from which he had watched the events earlier.

The Doctor hid in a cleft, counting down the seconds, waiting for the order he hoped would come.

“To all Kaled soldiers: Gather at the main entrance to the mines. The Dalek forces will remain where they are. This is not an exercise.”

Thirty seconds later, the Kaled guards passed his hiding spot at a run.

Another ninety seconds later the time fuses did exactly what they were supposed to do. The Nitro Nine exploded right on time — as soon as the soldiers had passed the bottleneck.

And now it was time to do what he had come for.

He entered the cave as if he owned the place, hands buried in the pockets of his leather jacket.

Surprisingly, it took the Daleks almost ten seconds to detect him, but then he suddenly became their centre of attention.

“You will identify yourself,” the Dalek standing on the right ordered.

“I’m the Doctor.” His voice was like ice. He had decided to skip the warning this time. It wouldn’t
work anyway.

“Doctor! You are an enemy of the Daleks,” the Dalek screeched, the lights on his head blinking. It raised its weapon threateningly, the other Dalek copying the motion. “You will be exterminated!”

“Oh, will I?” he replied coldly. “And how exactly are you gonna do that if I do this?” He took the hand that held the sonic out of his pocket, pressed a button and the bomb he had planted on the spur of rock exploded.

In hindsight, a smaller portion of Nitro Nine would have done nicely this time, too, because not only the spur of rock, but also part of the ceiling came down. The explosion buried the Daleks under an avalanche of rocks, turning them into a pile of scrap metal.

When the dust had partly settled, he turned towards the children, a forced, but hopefully convincing smile on his lips.

“Right. Let’s get you out of here.”

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It took almost an hour until the last few children began their ascent. Many of them were too weak to climb the corded ladder in less than five minutes, even if the ropes were strong enough to carry five or six children at a time, so they had to go slow. Fortunately the explosions had been strong enough to hold the Kaleds and, even more important, the Daleks back, although they would know by now that they had an intruder.

Every once in a while the Doctor could faintly hear Donna’s voice, providing directions for the children that had reached the top of the shaft. Serra had shown up with her own group of fugitives shortly before he had sent the first few children up, which had solved several organisational problems. Including the fact that they only knew the rough direction of the cave.

Serra had explained the exact position to some of the older children and left them behind as group leaders, then she had led a large group of smaller children to the hiding spot. Now Donna was sending the others after them, in small groups of five to eight children.

Finally it was the turn of the last child, a tiny girl of about seven, to climb the ladder. The girl stared upwards anxiously, tugging on one of her pigtails.

“What’s your name?” the Doctor asked, kneeling down in front of her.

“Della.”

“That’s a nice name. So, Della, what do you think about riding on my back?”

The girl looked at him, then nodded, hugging him impulsively.

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When they had sent the last group of children on their way to the cave, the Doctor turned back to the camp, an indescribable look on his face.

“Come on, Donna. We’re not finished yet.”

Looking at the Doctor, Donna was fairly certain that he wouldn’t give her a chance to rest, even if she asked. “Where are we going?”
“The camp,” he replied, in a clipped voice.

“But why?”

“Tying up a couple of loose ends.”

“And that are?”

The Doctor was silent.

“Oi, spaceman, I’m talking to you!”

“I’m gonna stop the Daleks. For good.”

Donna shivered at the barely disguised hatred in his voice, but she refused to let herself be intimidated. “And how?”

“Donna, what exactly did I say about being quiet when escaping? The same thing applies to sneaking behind enemy lines,” the Doctor said scathingly, then paused in an attempt to calm down a bit. “The TARDIS is half a mile that way, if you don’t wanna come.” He pointed.

“If you think you can just send me away, you’ve got another think coming!” He was up to something, she was certain. And whatever it was, she didn’t think he was in his right mind. She wasn’t going to leave him alone while he was in this kind of mood.

“Fine. Then come. But for god’s sake, keep quiet,” he hissed.

“Fine. But don’t think you’re off the hook, spaceman!” she hissed back.

They continued their way to the camp in frosty silence, occasionally having to hide from Dalek guards. It seemed the Kaled soldiers were still busy at the mines. After almost ten minutes they finally reached the lab, which was thankfully unguarded, apart from a lone Dalek patrol that vanished around the next corner without noticing them.

The Doctor soniced the door, and they entered the hut, only to find Doctor Gorran inside, playing the role of a nicely wrapped present.

“What are we doing here?” Donna asked.

The Doctor ignored her question and crossed the lab without even looking at the scientist. He opened a door that led to another room filled with electronic equipment and began to adjust settings. Slowly the symbols displayed on the monitors began to change.

“How did you know this was here?” If the Doctor thought he could just ignore her…

“You didn’t think I’d walk into a camp full of Daleks without doing some reconnaissance, did you?” he said scathingly.

“Do you think I’m stupid?” Her eyes narrowed.

“I really should have locked you in the TARDIS when I had the chance. Would have saved me a lot of trouble,” he murmured, without even looking up from the controls.

“Are you saying this is my fault?”

“No, but currently I’m trying to reprogram this machine. One mistake and it could kill us. So would
She had been right. He was about to do something dangerous. “No. Not until you’ve explained to me what this thing will do.”

He turned around and looked at her. “Just send this planet back into the stone age.”

“And how?”

“This will send an electromagnetic pulse through every electronic system within more than thousand miles.”

“What does that mean, Doctor?”

“Every single electronic device on this planet will stop working, including the electronic circuits that keep the Daleks alive. The Dalekanium might protect them to a certain degree, but it’s still early enough in their development that they don’t have any other shielding, and that’ll be enough. The Dalek civilisation ends, here and now.” He laid his hand on the controls again.

Did he really mean what he said? Every single electronic device? Because that would mean… “You can’t do that, Doctor! You’re not just killing the Daleks. You’re also killing the Thals and the Kaleds. Oh, not like the Daleks, but do you really think they’ll survive long without technology?”

“Do you think I don’t know that, Donna? But they are nothing more than walking dead anyway. It won’t be long until the Daleks kill them, even their own ancestors.”

“But this is wrong!”

“Why?” he replied, sounding almost curious. “Didn’t you see what they did?”

Looking into the dark abyss of his eyes scared Donna almost to death, but she held his gaze without wavering. “Yes, Doctor. I was there, remember?” she replied, sounding a lot more calm than she felt. “I’ve seen those children die. But it’s still wrong.”

“But I can stop this. Here and now. For good. I could save them, my people. If the Time War never happened…” His eyes conveyed a mixture of plea and madness.

“You can’t! You were the one who told me that you couldn’t change your past.”

He looked at her as if she had just dribbled on her shirt. “That’s the point, Donna. I’m a Time Lord. I can. I always could. And there is nothing left to stop me. Nothing. They’re all gone. My people, Rose. Gone because of the Daleks. They deserve nothing less.”

“Are you listening to yourself? Don’t you see what you’re doing? This is wrong!”

“No, Donna. This is my chance to end it. And I’m gonna take it. Nothing you can say will change my mind.”

Donna looked him straight in the eyes, and when she spoke she emphasised every word. “This is wrong, Doctor, and you know it. You’ve known all along. Rose would tell you the same.”

“Don’t you dare bring her into this!” His eyes blazed.

She didn’t even wince at the fury in his voice. “I’ll do it if I have to, if this is the only way to make you see. You’ve got to stop. Please, Doctor.”
“No.”

She shivered under the force of this single word, but she didn’t budge. “Then answer me a question, Time Lord. Just one. What would Rose say? And if you can tell her what you’re planning, that the universe would be a better place if you did this and she would agree, then I’ll step aside and let you do it.”
Chapter Twelve

“Then answer me a question, Time Lord. Just one. What would Rose say? And if you can tell her what you’re planning, that the universe would be a better place if you did this and she would agree, then I’ll step aside and let you do it.”

Donna looked at him serenely, waiting for his decision. It would be a matter of seconds to set the avalanche of destruction into motion and she wouldn’t even have a snowflake’s chance in hell to stop him. But she had called him upon the trust Rose had always placed in him, and so he closed his eyes and concentrated on the tiny golden spark that represented Rose in his mind.

The bond wasn’t strong enough yet to contact her directly, not without the TARDIS and especially not across the Void, but he could feel the warmth and compassion he had associated with her right from the beginning, even when she was standing between him and a lone Dalek, defending it against him.

“What about you, Doctor? What the hell are you changing into?”

The words hurt, even more than they had the first time, and worst of all, once again he didn’t know how to answer. How could a tiny human render him so constantly speechless without even trying or actually being there?

From the moment he had met her, her hand had been the anchor that had kept him grounded. She had known him less than a month when she had put her life in his hands, not even knowing what he was about to do or what he was capable of. She had believed then that he would do the right thing, a trust he had known he didn’t deserve. Not after what he had done, not considering what he had been about to do. He still didn’t deserve it, didn’t deserve her.

“Rose…”

He opened his eyes with a strangled gasp. His shoulders slumped and his hands fell off the controls. Unable to meet Donna’s eyes, he stepped back from the console.

“Come.” He turned around and left the hut, feeling completely numb. Thankfully the guards and the Daleks were still busy elsewhere, because he was beyond caring.

It took them almost an hour to reach the TARDIS, and he only spoke when absolutely necessary. Once inside, it took him less than a minute to send the ship into the Vortex. Then he left the console room without another word, leaving Donna behind. Two minutes later he collapsed on his bed, too exhausted to even remove his leather jacket.

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The street was crowded, but he spotted her immediately. Her eyes lit up when she discovered him, and with a few quick steps he crossed the distance between them. For the life of him he wasn’t able to determine what exactly he was feeling. He only knew that he needed her. Without conscious thought he pulled her into a tight embrace, clinging to her like a drowning man to a life belt. The sensation of her in his arms was the only thing that would maybe keep him sane.

Her arms came around him and he could feel her warm hand searching for a way under his jumper, caressing the tense muscles on his back. They stood there for a long time, completely ignorant of their surroundings.
Eventually he loosened his grip on her, cupped her face and kissed her with what was more than just a trace of desperation. His tongue begged for entrance, and she opened her mouth to let him in. He deepened the kiss, his tongue gliding against hers, seeking her warmth. Eventually her soft curves melted against his and her eyes fluttered shut.

Slowly he realised that he needed more than this to convince himself that she was alive, that the images he had seen in his dreams were just a figment of his imagination. He closed his eyes and concentrated for a moment, never breaking the kiss. Eventually he let her come up for breath, and when she opened her eyes she gasped in surprise.

Beneath their feet a wide plain covered with marine blue grass stretched for miles, while the lower part of the mountain they were standing on was overgrown with pale blue flowers. The upper part of the mountain was covered with what would have looked like oaks, had it not been for the light blue colour of their leaves. A red orb covered almost a third of the sky, casting a mad light over their surroundings.

A rustling sound startled them and they observed a swarm of bird-like creatures settling down in a tree a few hundred feet away from them.

“Where are we?” Rose asked, her voice betraying that she was unsure what to make of this.

The Doctor kept silent. He didn’t even know what had possessed him to take her here. This planet had seen one of the most gruesome acts of the Time War, a genetic bomb that had killed every being whose genetic code had carried a certain receptor. They had simply dissolved into nothing, as if they had never existed. Only their buildings remained, and those animals whose evolutionary development had gone into a different direction. And although this hadn’t been meant to happen, the few Time Lords that had been fighting for the sake of the rest of the universe hadn’t been able to undo it.

Instead of answering, he just took her hand and led her to a small cabin near the rim of the forest. She followed him inside, and as soon as he had closed the door he began to remove her clothes, occasionally pausing to kiss her.

“Doctor? What happened?” she asked eventually, her voice still calm, although her breath was already quickening.

It was just like Rose to sense that something was wrong. More than once her compassion had been the only thing that stopped him from falling into the abyss of insanity. Not that he was feeling particularly sane at the moment. Now he just needed her, her warmth, her being Rose.

Again he ignored her question, concentrating on removing her shirt, revealing a utilitarian white cotton bra. He shrugged out of his leather jacket, ignoring the thud it made when it hit the floor, and searched for the clasp of her bra, while Rose kicked off her shoes and toed off her socks. As soon as he had removed the bra he opened the zip of her jeans, then pushed the garment down along with her knickers, so she could step out of her clothes.

He walked her back to the bed and she lay down, staring at him, her expression an odd mixture of calmness, confusion, worry and desire. With economic movements he got rid of his remaining clothes. For a few seconds he just looked at her, until the need for her overwhelmed him.

Deep inside a small voice told him that this was wrong, that he was using her, but he covered her body with his and entered her without hesitation. She groaned, the sound more painful than aroused, and he paused for a second to look her in the eyes. For the sake of his sanity he wanted to believe that he would stop if she asked him to, but he wasn’t sure he could. He waited. She bit her lip, then
nodded slowly, and he began to pound into her.

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Afterwards she held him, his head resting on her breast, her fingers caressing his scalp soothingly. For a long time both of them were silent.

“I’m sorry,” he mumbled eventually, his first words since he had discovered her on the street.

“What for?”

He turned to his side, his head propped on his elbow, embarrassment written over his face. “I used you. I shouldn’t have...”

She held a finger to his lips to silence him. “Shhh. It was what you needed, and you didn’t hurt me. I love you. I would have given this to you no matter what.”

If possible his embarrassment deepened. “No, Rose. This is not... You’re going to be my bond mate, and I...”

She interrupted him with a brief kiss. “It’s okay. Believe me. It is. As long as there will be more foreplay next time,” she added with a wry grin.

He avoided her gaze and stared at a point somewhere at the opposite wall.

“Oh, come here.” She pulled him nearer and hugged him. Both of them were naked, but this time the embrace was anything but sexual. His body was tense at first, and she ran her hands soothingly over the muscles on his back for some time. Finally he relaxed against her.

“What happened?” she asked eventually, still holding him close. His answer chilled her to the bone.

“Skaro.”

Rose stared at him, the implications of his words racing through her mind, but she kept silent. Eventually he would talk. It always took him some time to organise his thoughts while he tried to decide what to tell her and what to keep to himself. Not that it ever worked. As soon as he’d begin to speak he’d tell her almost everything. Still running her hands over his back she waited patiently until he began to talk, almost matter-of-factly, as if he was reciting a report.

“We were on our way to Cardiff when the TARDIS was hit by something. I don’t even know what it was. It should have been impossible. She was completely out of control, her temporal stabilisers and the dematerialisation circuit damaged, and she was losing Thallium. Skaro was the only planet with the correct isotope in range, but she was too severely damaged to land us anywhere near the source. It took us more than three days just to get there ‘cos we had to avoid being seen.” He paused briefly. “We were already on our way back when Donna ran into a bunch of Daleks on their first day out.”

It took him more than an hour to tell her what had happened, and he was visibly shaking by the time he came to what had happened in the lab, what he had almost done. Eventually he fell silent.

Oh, Doctor. The first time they’d encountered a Dalek he’d barely held it together. He had got better over time, true, but the facade was brittle. Anything unexpected could shatter it, and this had been much worse than last time. She slowly ran her hands over his back, trying to loosen the tension that had crept back into his muscles while he had spoken.
He raised his head and looked at her. She’d rarely seen his eyes so lifeless.

“I wouldn’t have stopped without Donna, and she had to shove you into my face to get me to see. But even so I nearly got her killed. Her, those people, they could all have died because of me. If Donna hadn’t stopped me… You really should run from me, Rose, as far and as fast as you can. I’ll only destroy you, too.”

He freed himself from her arms, got up and paced the room with the suppressed energy of a caged panther, completely ignorant of his lack of clothes.

She had really thought they had got beyond that point. It seemed whatever had happened on Skaro had been an even closer call than she’d thought, and she feared for him. It wouldn’t take much more, and he would close himself off completely, like he had been doing when she’d first met him.

She sat up and wrapped the blanket around her body. “Doctor, look at me.”

He paused for a moment and shot her a glance, but then he averted his eyes again and resumed his pacing.

She got up as well. “Doctor.”

When he showed no reaction she simply blocked his way. When she had agreed to bond with him she had known that she was also agreeing to put up with a lot of things, but him trying to push her away was completely out of the question. She was not going to let that happen. Never again. She gripped him at his wrists.

He could have shaken her off easily if he wanted to, but he didn’t, even if he avoided her eyes.

“Look at me.” Her voice was gentle, but firm.

Eventually he complied. When his eyes locked with hers her breath hitched on the devastation and despair she saw there.

“It’s not your fault, Doctor.”

“You can’t know that.” His voice was completely devoid of emotion.

A tiny smile played around her lips. “I know you, and that’s enough for me. You didn’t land the TARDIS on Skaro on purpose, did you?”

“No.”

“And you didn’t hand over Donna to her fate, did you?”

“No.”

“And you did everything in your power to free her and those children, didn’t you?”

“Yes,” he agreed reluctantly. “Until…”

She interrupted him before he could finish what she already knew he would say. “Then I don’t see any reason why this should be your fault. And if you’re going to tell me that you are responsible for Donna wandering off you’re gonna get a smack,” she added in a weak attempt to lighten the atmosphere.

She should have known that it wouldn’t work. Not when he was in this mood.
“I should have told her to stay in the TARDIS,” he said tonelessly. “Then she wouldn’t have spent a
week being imprisoned in that camp.”

She smiled. “As if that would have worked. From what you told me she isn’t exactly a person who
would just sit back and watch, and I bet she is as lousy at following rule number one as I am.”

“Don’t you dare make this her fault,” he hissed at her, his eyes narrowing, his body leaning into her
personal space.

She refused to be intimidated. This was much too important. “Doctor, that’s the point: It’s nobody’s
fault. Not yours, not hers, not mine.”

“You weren’t even there,” he protested.

“No, I wasn’t,” she acknowledged, but she ventured on. “Doctor, we knew it would be dangerous
when we decided to come with you. But we came anyway.” It felt weird to include Donna when she
didn’t even know her, but she was absolutely certain he would have told her about the dangers when
he asked her to come with him. Especially after what had happened to herself.

“That’s not the point!”

At least he was fighting back now. “Yes, it is, Doctor. It is our life and we get to decide what we do
with it. That’s what living means. You should know. You’re the one who showed me.”

She looked at him solemnly, willing him to understand.

“No, Rose. It’s not that easy.” He freed his arms from her grip and began to pace the room again.
“No matter how you look at it, this is my fault. I could have put a stop to it. But I didn’t.” He cast her
a short glance, wondering what she would make of his admission. She didn’t move, just listened
attentively. He took a deep breath.

“In my forth life the Time Lords sent me on a mission to prevent the creation of the Daleks. I
couldn’t do it. I knew what they’d do, well, some of it, because I’d already watched it happen, but I
still couldn’t destroy them. Everything they ever did is my fault. Every being that ever got killed by a
Dalek death ray. The entire Time War.” He turned around and stared at the wall, although he didn’t
see it. All he saw was the devastation the Daleks had caused on his home planet when they’d finally
broken the barriers and the even greater evil that had come from this.

“That you didn’t kill them in their cradles or eggs or whatever only tells me that you’ve got a
conscience, and that’s one of the many reasons I love you. I know you’d never do anything like that,
unless you had absolutely no choice.”

He heard her move, the gentle whisper of the sheet she had wrapped around herself, and then he felt
a warm hand slip into his. He wanted to push her away, didn’t want to pollute her with the blood that
stained his hands, but he craved her warmth too much.

“That you didn’t kill them in their cradles or eggs or whatever only tells me that you’ve got a
conscience, and that’s one of the many reasons I love you. I know you’d never do anything like that,
unless you had absolutely no choice.”

Rose paused briefly before she continued, sounding curious, “I really wonder why they gave you
that assignment. You’re not exactly a person who would carry out an order without thinking, and
whoever sent you there should have known that, should have known you. I bet you were not that
different then, apart from a penchant for multi-coloured scarves.” She smiled briefly at a memory of a
picture he had shown her. “Besides, it was their decision to declare war on the universe, and don’t
you tell me that wouldn’t have happened if you’d killed them.”

He could almost hear the force of an oncoming slap behind her words. To tell the truth, that would have been his reply. She really knew him too well.

She tightened her grip at his hand. “Doctor, believe me, not everything that ever goes wrong in the universe is your fault.”

“Oh, Rose.” He wrapped her in his arms and buried his head in the nape of her neck, trying to get lost in her scent, wanting to shut out the universe forever. “What do I do without you?”

She had already made it very clear that she would regenerate him herself if he ever put her over the safety of the universe, but sometimes he wondered what he would be capable of just to get her back. If someone offered him a Faustian bargain he would be more than tempted to accept it.

She leaned back to look at him, then she smiled, a bit shakily, but it was warm, genuine and completely Rose. “What you always do: Barge into people’s lives, blow up their jobs, and save the universe in time for tea.”

A barely visible smile played around the corners of his mouth. He rested his chin on her head, and for some time they just stood in the small room, holding onto each other, sharing their warmth.
Eventually the Doctor became aware of their current attire, or better, the lack thereof. He was thoroughly embarrassed of what he had done to Rose earlier. He had never intended to use her like that, but he hadn’t been able to hold back. She had said it didn’t matter to her, but it did to him. And then he’d gone and dumped his latest personal nightmare on her, only to have her telling him that it wasn’t his fault. He was going to make it up to her. After what she had done for him she deserved nothing less.

With the tip of his finger he raised her chin, bent down and kissed her softly. At first his lips barely touched hers, but he slowly increased the pressure. She sighed against him and opened her lips to grant him access. He ran his tongue across her lower lip, tasting her, then entered her mouth.

He took his time, exploring every nook and cranny, running his tongue along her teeth, until it finally began a languid dance with hers. He could feel her arms moving around his neck, and he began to run his hands over her back, feeling her body heat through the thin cotton sheet that separated them. His tongue stroked hers, gliding against it sensuously, while she ran her fingers through his close-cropped hair. Eventually he broke the kiss, and she gasped for air, but pulled him back to her quickly.

His tongue invaded her mouth once more, at first teasing her with tiny strokes against her tongue, then gliding over the roof of her mouth, agonizingly slow. She moaned and he grinned against her lips. Then he began to thrust into her mouth more forcefully, his hands unhurriedly gliding up her sides until they grazed her breasts. His thumbs sought out her nipples through the cotton of the sheet, circling them and arousing them to taut buds.

Then he tugged at the corner of the sheet that Rose had used to secure the fabric around her body and pulled it out with infinite slowness. “You’re overdressed,” he commented, breaking the kiss. Rose raised an eyebrow, not yet willing to admit what his actions were doing to her. “Whenever we meet, you keep saying that. And I’m sure you know how to do something about it.”

“Oh, definitely.”

How someone could let those two words sound so filthy was beyond her. She could feel herself growing wet. The Doctor was still circling her nipple through the cotton, and it was driving her insane, slowly but steadily. A needy moan escaped her and he chuckled, never interrupting the slow motion of his thumb.

Finally he had pulled the tail free and the sheet loosened, almost completely baring one of her breasts. Only his body against hers stopped it from gliding to the floor. She could feel his erection through the thin fabric and writhed against him, aching for friction.

“Touch me,” she gasped. “Please.”
The Doctor smirked, the look on his face so filthy that another wave of heat shot through her and pooled in her belly. “Your wish is my command. But be careful what you wish for.”

He stepped back, letting the sheet glide to the floor, baring her to him. For a few seconds he just stood there, taking her in, his nostrils flaring. “You’re so beautiful. You’ve got no idea how much I want you right now.” He raised an eyebrow. “And I intend to take you. Slowly.”

Rose stood in front of him, feeling his burning gaze almost physically on her skin. She could feel herself getting wetter by the second. In an attempt to provide some friction against her throbbing clit she pressed her thighs together, but it wasn’t enough. She needed more than this, needed him closer, needed to feel him on her skin, needed him filling her. She ached for touch, his, hers, it didn’t matter. She moved her hand to touch herself, but he captured it in his.

“Like I said, Rose, slowly.” His voice dropped almost an octave on the last word, his tone so seductive that she felt her knees go weak. Then he ran his thumb over her nipple once more and she gasped as if she’d been hit by an electric jolt.

“Then take me!”

“Oh, not yet, Rose. You wanted more foreplay; you’re going to get it.” The Doctor dropped to a knee to lick at her breast, closing in on the areola and finally sucking on her. Never releasing her nipple, he eventually slipped a finger between her folds, circling her clit lightly. A wave of heat flashed through her body, and her knees threatened to give out once again. Then he slid a finger inside her, keeping it completely still once he had entered her as far as possible.

She pressed his head against her breast and rocked against his hand, coating it with her wetness, but it wasn’t nearly enough. She needed more than this, more of him, all of him. She moaned in frustration.

Abruptly he released her nipple and blew on it. The sudden change in temperature caused the bud to tighten even more. Then he turned his attention to her other breast, his finger still inside her, still not moving, still not providing enough friction. The Doctor was driving her crazy, and this was just not fair. Then he suddenly removed his hand, and she groaned.

Somehow she was able to summon two or three working brain cells, which seemed to be all he had left her with. This game could be played by two, she decided, grasped his hand and brought it up to her lips, intent to drive him as crazy with desire as he had done with her. Searching his eyes she began to lick off her own juices, slowly cleaning one finger after another, tasting herself on him.

He got up, his gaze darkening until the blue of his eyes looked almost black. With a final swipe of her tongue she released his hand, and his lips crashed down on her, his tongue trusting into her mouth as if he wanted to devour her.

Rose ran her palms over his upper arms and his pectoral muscles. When she reached his nipples she circled them with her index finger, slightly scraping the sensitive skin. He broke the kiss and hissed, rocking against her. Rose moved one of her hands down and circled the tip of his penis with her thumb. He groaned.

Smiling at him devilishly, she hooked her foot around his lower leg, brought her hands up to his chest and pushed, laying her entire weight into the motion. With a completely undignified huff the Doctor landed on his back, the fall cushioned by the bed. Rose straddled his legs, then wrapped her hand around his cock. She began to stroke him slowly, enjoying the startled expression on his face that was soon replaced by desire.
“And you told me you know Venusian Aikido. I’m not sure if I can believe that.” She grinned at him, her tongue poking through her teeth and mischief sparkling in her eyes.

“I know Venusian Aikido!” he protested, followed by an involuntary moan at her ministrations. She added at turn of her wrist at the end of every upward stroke, and his hands dug into the bed sheet.

She gave him another grin, then swiped her tongue over the head of his erection. “Yeah, and you fell for a basic judo move.”

“I was distracted!”

Her eyes sparkled. “I can see that,” she gave back, before she began to lick his cock. She started at the base and followed the vein on the underside, tracing it just with the tip of her tongue. When she had reached the head of his shaft she turned her attention to the sides, until there wasn’t a part of his cock she hadn’t touched. Then she engulfed him with her mouth and began to suck, occasionally grazing the sensitive skin with her teeth.

“What are you doing?” he asked, his breath already becoming laboured, despite his respiratory bypass system.

She released him, only to enclose his erection with her hand and stroke him. “Well, what does it feel like?” She grinned mischievously and squeezed his balls lightly.

“Fantastic,” he blurted out.

Rose broke into laughter, almost breaking the rhythm. “Good.” She blew on his cock and his hips jerked involuntarily.

“Rose…” He trailed off when she licked his shaft once more, but eventually found his voice again. “I want to make love to you. I want… to make it up to you.”

“I know.” She really did. He still thought that he had used her and it embarrassed him, even if she hadn’t minded. Skaro had been tough on him, and the nightmares he’d had during that time certainly hadn’t helped either. He had needed reassurance, had needed to know that she was still there, even if she was in another universe. She probably would have done the same, and she definitely wasn’t going to let him beat himself up about this.

She smiled at him lovingly, then grinned. “But why should you have all the fun?”

Releasing his shaft, Rose adjusted her position slightly until she could begin to lower herself on him, inch by inch. A few times she paused, rising again, but never so far that he would slip back out. Even if he managed to stay silent, the look in his eyes told her exactly what her actions were doing to him. Eventually she engulfed him completely and simply enjoyed the feeling of completeness for a few seconds. Then she began to move, slowly gliding up and down his length, still intent to driving him crazy with need.

Eventually he couldn’t hold back longer and groaned. “Rose…”

She didn’t stop her motions, if possible only moved slower, taking him deeper. Her fingernail grazed one of his nipples and he shivered involuntarily, his cock twitching inside her. His pupils were so dilated that his eyes appeared almost black, but somehow he was able to regain some self-control.

“You’re so gonna pay for this,” he ground out, trying to calm himself down a bit.

“Then make me,” she challenged.
“Oh, I will.” He raised his hands, one resting on her hip, the other lightly touching her clit, copying her motions. At first she barely felt anything, but whenever she sank down on him the pressure on her clit increased and when she rose it lessened slightly, without ever really stopping. It was amazing. And it was beginning to drive her insane, slowly but steadily.

Eventually he began to rub the bud lightly, his hand still following her motions, and pleasure began to roll over her in hot waves. She moaned long and low. “So good.”

She was so very close to coming, and he made it impossible for her to hold back. When she sank down on him again he pressed her clit, harder than he had before, and she came, his name on her lips.

When she came back to her senses she realised that she had collapsed on top of him, his erection still buried in her.

“You alright?” he asked, stroking her hair.

She nodded against him, too exhausted to speak.

He slowly glided out of her, then turned them around. Sitting up, he parted her legs and knelt between them. For a long moment he just drank her in, then licked his lips and bent down to taste her. He ran his tongue along her folds, dipped briefly into her centre and finally began to suck on her over-sensitised clit. She writhed beneath him, moaning when another rush of heat pooled in her centre. Then he swiped his tongue over her clit and she almost jerked off the bed.

“Doctor, I don’t think I can….,” she managed between gasps.

“Oh, I think you’ll find you can,” he said, looking up and licking her juices from his lips. Then he bent down again and continued to torment her with tongue and teeth.

He was right. She could, and she wanted. Desperately. Within minutes she was so coiled up with tension that she trembled at every touch, hovering at the edge again. She closed her eyes and dug her hands into the bed sheet, expecting him to drive her over the edge once more, but he stopped suddenly.

Rose groaned in frustration and opened her eyes again, only to see the bloody bastard smirking at her. “More. Please…” she moaned, too wound up to care that she was begging.

He laid one of his fingers on her swollen clit, touching her so lightly she could barely feel it. “More what?”

She tried to writhe against his finger but he removed it immediately.


“Like I said. I intend to take you. Slowly.”

The Doctor kissed her leisurely, and she began to relax a bit, the wave slowly tapering off. He wanted to be inside her when she came again, but he also wanted to take his time. He didn’t want this to end, this precious moment between universes that he didn’t deserve after what he had almost done, but had been given nonetheless.

For a moment he paused to look at the woman in front of him. She was so very beautiful like this, her skin flushed, her hair spread on the bed like a halo. She could have done so much better, and sometimes he still wondered why she had chosen a broken man.
“I love you,” he whispered, the need for her almost overwhelming him.

Their eyes locked, and he gave her a beatific smile that was mirrored on her face.

“I love you,” she replied.

For a moment that seemed to last an eternity nothing else existed, then he spread her legs further and slowly glided into her, fighting his sudden urge to increase the speed. He needed her as much as she needed him, needed to feel her around him, complementing him, but he also wanted to savour the moment, prolong it as much as possible.

When he was buried in her completely he paused, relishing in the feel of her tight walls around him, then he began to move. Tiny motions that were barely perceptible were soon replaced by long, slow strokes designed to hit her core.

She opened her legs even further and raked her fingers over his back, urging him on. “Harder. Faster. Need you.” Her eyes were filled with more trust and love than he could possibly deserve. “Please, Doctor.”

He thrust into her, harder than before, penetrating her deeper. When he was buried into her to the hilt, he paused briefly only to retreat until just the tip of his shaft was still inside her. Meeting her eyes, he pounded into her again. Rose moaned. The sound dissolved the last shreds of self-control. He began to move faster, the increasing friction heightening his own desire for her even more.

She ran her hand over his scalp, drawing him closer. “Kiss me.”

Keeping up the rhythm of his thrusts, he invaded her with his tongue. She drew him even closer and kissed him back with a ferocity he hadn’t expected, her tongue battling with his. Eventually he broke the kiss, abandoned her mouth and scraped the soft skin of her throat with his teeth. Rose hissed at the delicate pain and bit his earlobe in return.

He captured her hands and brought them over her head, pinning her to the bed. Then he kissed her again, lightly biting her lower lip. She moaned. “So close. Please, Doctor, I want to come.”

He rearranged her legs and changed the angle slightly. Then he began to thrust into her even deeper, hitting her core with every stroke. She writhed against him, trying to take him as deep as she could. He bit her neck and simultaneously pressed her clit. “Come for me, love.”

Rose cried out, her entire body tensing, her walls tightening convulsively around him. A tear ran down her cheek and he gently wiped it away, still moving inside her. It took him only a few more thrusts, then he followed her over the edge.

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When Rose opened her eyes again, she found the Doctor staring at her so intently as if he feared she would vanished if he turned his eyes away. When he realised that she was awake he smiled and cupped her cheek with his hand. “Tell me about your life.”

Rose thought for a few moments. After all he had gone through since they had last seen each other, she certainly wasn’t going to tell him about the latest alien invasion that had hit them, or the pretty boys her mum still tried to introduce occasionally. Although that thought gave her an idea. This was going to be fun, she decided and carefully schooled her features into a serious expression. “Well, there’s definitely something I’ve got to tell you, Doctor,” she began tentatively, as if she didn’t know how to deliver horrible news.
He propped up on his elbow and looked at her expectantly. “Yes?”

She took a deep breath, as if to gather her courage, and dropped the bombshell. “There’s another man in my life.”

“What?” The Doctor stared at her, a storm brewing in his eyes.

“I’ve known him for almost six weeks, and apart from you he’s got the most atrocious timing of the world.” She smiled softly.

The Doctor looked thunderous. “Rose…”

Seeing his expression Rose collapsed into laughter. Eventually she calmed down and another radiant smile lit her face. “It’s not what you think, Doctor. I’m a big sister.”

Slowly a grin crept up on his face. “Jackie and Pete?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I hope he takes after Pete, then. I don’t think your universe would survive another Jackie Tyler.”

“Oi!” She swatted him playfully. “She’s my mother!”

“Yeah, I still wonder how you turned out so fantastic!”

“You should really put some work into your compliments, you know. They’d be much more impressive if they weren’t so insulting.” She grinned at him.

He laughed and pulled her close, ghosting a kiss over her lips. “Do you’ve got any idea how much I love you?”

She couldn’t even begin to tell how glad she was to hear him laughing. His behaviour had really been worrying her.

It felt as if he’d thought that he didn’t have anything to lose anymore, and that would be several kinds of Bad, with a capital B. She had seen it before, in that bunker in Utah, and it had scared her to death then. She hoped he wouldn’t become reckless while he was searching for a way to bring them back together.

Not that she didn’t want him to find a way across the Void, she did, with a force that almost overwhelmed her. Sometimes she wanted to be with him, just be with him, so fiercely she could hardly breathe. She wanted to hold his hand while running for her life, wanted him to reassure her that they’d find a way out of whatever hopeless situation they were in. Hell, she even wanted to hear one of his scathing remarks because she had managed to get covered in alien goo again, wanted to argue with him about who was responsible for them being out of milk, which would lead to one of his all-too-familiar rants about domestics.

She wanted to be with him with every fibre of her being, but she didn’t want to come back to a man who had thrown away everything he had always believed in, just for her. She’d prefer the man who had closed the bulkheads in that bunker in Utah to a man who would endanger the universe just to get her back, anytime. That wouldn’t be the man who she had fallen in love with, and she knew she wouldn’t be able to bear the knowledge of what he’d done for her.

“I love you, too,” she whispered across his lips and cuddled into his arms, the steady beat of his
hearts lulling her into sleep.
Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Summary

Enter Jack Harkness...

The Doctor should have seen it coming weeks ago; heck, he should have seen it coming directly after Skaro, but he hadn’t. He had seen that Donna was still trying to come to terms with what had happened on Skaro, but she hadn’t said anything, and he had done what he always did and changed the topic. Well, not so much changed, more like forgotten about it. The TARDIS had still been severely damaged, and the short trip to bring her near the camp had short-circuited a part of the auto-gravity system he hadn’t been able to replace easily.

After finally making it off planet they had floated in the Vortex for a week or so, while he had conducted necessary repairs and the TARDIS had begun to heal herself. Then he had brought them to Oloxos Three where he’d tried to buy a new converter for the auto-gravity system and they’d promptly got involved in a full-blown revolution. After that had come Irelene Seven, where he had hoped to acquire a replacement for a new dynamorphic generator, or at least something he could rig up accordingly. Unfortunately they’d run into a king who thought it a deadly offense if another man wore trousers in his presence, followed by the inevitable running for their lives.

All that had taken time, and now Donna was standing in front of him, arms on her hips, and yelling so loudly that she could have given Jackie Tyler a run for her money.

“Three months? You’re telling me it has been three months?” she screeched and glared at him accusingly. “I’ve been travelling with you for three months without as much as talking to my folks? Let alone visiting! Oh my god, they probably think I’m dead or have been abducted by an alien! Wait! I have been abducted by an alien!”

Eventually she had to pause in her tirade for a second to catch some air and he used the opportunity to cut her off. “You might have noticed that we were a bit busy in the last couple of weeks. And like I said before: I don’t make a habit of reading people’s thoughts, so excuse me if I didn’t know what was going on in that head of yours. If you wanted to go home you only had to say the word.”

That was only to be expected, he thought. Of course she would want to go home, especially after what he had almost done on Skaro. He sighed inwardly and turned to the console, asking over his shoulder, “Where do you want me to drop you off?”

Donna looked at him as if he had just grown a second head. “Oh, you’re a dumbo! I don’t want to go home. Just see my family sometime, or just talk to them!”

This time it was his turn to look at Donna as if she had turned lilac all of a sudden. “Humans! Sometimes I wonder what’s going on in that brain of yours. Ever heard of the concept of telling somebody something that’s bothering you? Someone stole your speech centre? No, can’t be, last week you managed to talk us even deeper in trouble than we were already in.”

“Oh! How was I to know that commenting on the colour of the king’s trousers was implying that I wanted to be a member of his harem? You’re supposed to be the tour guide! And you were the one that got us arrested in the first place.”
“Damaged ship, remember? We can count ourselves lucky that we made to Irelene Seven, let alone a
time period where I could find a replacement for the dynamorphic generator. Without that we might
have been stranded anywhere in the universe, so excuse me if my priorities differ from yours.”

“That’s exactly the point, Doctor: the entire time you were like ‘if I don’t repair the ship, the entire
universe is gonna collapse’. I didn’t want to interrupt.”

“Donna, you phoning your folks does not exactly stop me from repairing the TARDIS. If I could
survive Rose forcing me to tell Jackie that I would fix her dishwasher while I was in the midst of
calibrating the navigation system, I can survive overhearing you telling your mum the latest
developments in NewEastEnders.”

Donna looked confused. “Who’s Jackie? And what’s NewEastEnders? Wait, this box has a phone?”

“Donna, this is a dimensionally transcendent time ship that looks like a telephone box from the
nineteen-fifties gallivanting through time and space. Of course she has a phone!”

“And why wasn’t that information part of the info packet?”

“Well, it’s not as if I had many people to call, is it?”

“Oh, I knew you were lying when you said you had friends!”

“Oi! I do have friends. I just don’t make a habit of handing out my phone number willy-nilly.” He
trusted that the TARDIS would bring him wherever he was needed without someone having to call
him, and he certainly wasn’t going to dangle on anyone’s string, especially not the people who ran
UNIT these days.

“And what does that mean? You’ve got a phone, but you won’t let me use it because someone might
get a hold of your number?”

He could almost hear the oncoming slap behind Donna’s words. “You’ve got a mobile, don’t you?”

“And what’s that to do with the price of tea? A mobile’s bloody useless in space. I checked, you
know.”

He sighed. “Donna, I travel through time and space in a ship that looks like a blue box. One’d think
I’d be able to rig up your phone for intergalactial and intertemporal roaming.”

“You can rig up my phone for what?”

“Donna phone home,” he said, indicating quotation marks with his fingers.

“Oi! I’m not stupid!”

“Well, you asked. So, do you want to call your family or not?” he said, extending his hand.

“And who tells me it’s still gonna work afterwards?” Donna asked suspiciously. “I mean, you’re still
repairing the TARDIS, and it’s been months since we crashed.”

“One, the TARDIS is old; two, it’s not like I could make a pit-stop at the next repair shop. Which
reminds me. We should go to Cardiff. Soon.”

“Cardiff,” she said incredulously. “What are we’re going to do in Cardiff?”

“What I intended to do before we crashed. Refuel.”
“And you can’t do a pit-stop somewhere more interesting? Paris? Or maybe Rome? Or a shopping planet?”

“Unless they recently acquired a rift through time and space, nope.” He paused briefly. “Last chance. Do you want me to rig up your phone or not?”

“As long as I get free roaming, too. And I expect a visit to a shopping planet after Cardiff.”

The Doctor sighed. The things he did for companions.

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“Sir? Something strange is happening on the Plass,” Ianto Jones announced, a slight strain in his voice. For Ianto that equalled almost an emotional outburst.

Captain Jack Harkness hurried over to the line of monitors Ianto was referring to. “What do you mean, something is happening?”

His team member simply pointed at one of the screens.

Jack stared at the monitor disbelievingly for a couple of seconds, unable to look away from the blue box materialising in front of the fountain. Then he spun into action.

“Monitor the blue box,” he advised Ianto while he snatched his greatcoat from the railing, where he had deposited it after their last mission, and ignored the questions of his team members. Then he activated the lift that would take him directly to the Plass.

The motion of the lift gave him some time to think. The Doctor. But which one? During the years he had spent on Earth he had seen various versions of him, including an incarnation he was certain was from the future. Hair gel and pinstripes. The very no-nonsense, leather and jeans version he had known would be horrified, he had thought amusedly.

He had always kept his distance. After hearing Rose’s story about the Reapers he had decided that he could do without that particular experience. But there was more to it. Whenever he accidently ran into an incarnation of the Doctor and didn’t maintain a certain distance, the Doctor retreated himself, as if he was repelled by a very large magnet of identical charge.

After what seemed a much longer ascent than normal, the lift reached the Plass and he stood on the stone for a few brief seconds, protected from any prying eyes by the perception filter. Out of the corner of his eyes he could see a red-headed woman crossing the Plass. As always, it amazed him that the groups of tourists filling the area completely ignored the blue box parked in front of the Water Tower.

His gaze returned to the TARDIS and he wondered what incarnation would leave the ship. His question was answered when the door opened and a tall man in a black leather jacket appeared.

Seeing this incarnation again brought it all back. The last exchange of words with the Daleks, the brief flash of green before everything went black, the rasping pain in his lungs that came with the first breath after he had regained consciousness, the TARDIS dematerialising in front of his eyes, the countless deaths since then. And the anger at the man who had left him there.

The Doctor leant against the doors, his arms folded, his legs crossed at the ankles. The soldier in Jack immediately noticed the tension radiating from the figure in front of him, although to someone who didn’t know him quite as well the Doctor would present a picture of nonchalance.
He wondered where Rose was. He was certain that this was after Satellite Five for the Doctor, but was it after Canary Wharf? He had seen her name on the lists, had heard the rumours that the Doctor had been there, but he hadn’t looked at the CCTV evidence, although he had access to it. He had thought he couldn’t bear to see her, see them again, the family he had had for such a short time, and then watch her die. Yet another death the Doctor was responsible for.

Jack took a deep breath and stepped forward, leaving the protection of the perception filter. With a few quick steps he crossed the distance between the lift and the TARDIS and stopped abruptly about three yards from him.

The Doctor gave him a curt nod. “Jack.”

“Give me one reason why I shouldn’t introduce my fist to your face,” he said through gritted teeth.

The Doctor took a step in his direction and shrugged. “Do whatever you think you have to do. I probably deserve it. But if you want the reason why I left you on Satellite Five, you’re wrong.”

“Oh, because I’m just a stupid ape who couldn’t possibly understand why you left me behind? Or are you going to tell me I was hallucinating when I saw the TARDIS disappearing in front of my eyes?” Jack remarked scathingly.

The blue eyes showed regret and sympathy. “No, Jack. You’re Wrong.”

This time he could hear the capitalised letter. Despite his inclination to stay angry his curiosity got the better of him and he asked, “What do you mean, Wrong?”

“You’re immortal,” the Doctor stated.

“Oh, really? I hadn’t noticed. I’ve only been killed, like, a dozen times during the last hundred forty years, by almost anything you could imagine, including a bloody javelin!” Jack shouted.

The Doctor winced at the sarcasm, then sighed, apparently having reached a decision he didn’t like but would carry through regardless. “Jack, I’m not just someone travelling through space and time in a slightly unusual looking ship. I’m a Time Lord. I can see time, literally everything that is, was and ever could be. If I want to I can even manipulate it, to a certain degree. For me, time is always in flux. I see possibilities being born and extinguished in seconds. But you, you are a fact. Permanent. Even looking at you is hard for me. I won’t lie to you, Jack. When I left you on Satellite Five I had no intention of ever coming back. Every instinct is telling me to run, as fast as I can.”

The admission hurt. He had thought they’d been friends, and now the Doctor told him that he couldn’t even bear to look at him? “Then why don’t you?”

“Because it’s not fair to you. It’s not your fault.”

“Then whose fault is it?” He had spent so many nights wondering why this had happened to him, cursing his fate and the person who had inflicted it upon him. He simply didn’t have the patience to wait for an answer anymore.

The answer he got was not the one he expected. “I tried to trick Rose when I sent her home from Satellite Five.” The Doctor’s lips twitched with humour. “Not one of my wisest moves. I should’ve known she wouldn’t do what I told her. Somehow she persuaded my frankly magnificent and incredibly stubborn time ship to help her.”

Even if the Doctor hadn’t told him everything yet, what he had said was enough for Jack to reach a conclusion. “Rose did that? But how?”
“She looked into the Time Vortex. For a couple of minutes a single human being had all of time and space at her fingertips, and she used it to rescue us. She wiped out the entire Dalek fleet with a sweep of her hand. Literally. She simply turned them into dust. In all my lives I've never seen anything like this before, Jack.” He had a far off look on his face, as if a whole universe of possibilities was being born in front of him.

“A Time Lord with that sort of power would have become a vengeful god, but she was only human. She just couldn’t stand you being dead. With another wink of her hand she resurrected you. Even with the power of the Time Vortex at her disposal, everything she did was so human. The only thing she wanted was to keep us safe.”

“Us?”

“Jack, you’re the brother she never had,” the Doctor replied impatiently. “What do you think she would have done? Leave you to rot?” He stared at him like he’d just dribbled on his coat. “But she couldn’t control it. She brought you back permanently. The last act of the Time War: Life.”

If somebody else had told him he wouldn’t have believed it. “Does she know?”

The Doctor shook his head. “I almost lost her that day. Had she given up the power only seconds later she would have died. Even so, she nearly did. The power was almost too much for her heart. I couldn’t deal with that and with what you had become. Not at the same time. I’m a coward, Jack, and I was selfish, and so I lied. I told her you were busy rebuilding the Earth.” He gave him a wry grin. “Rose is going to kill me for running from you if she ever finds out that I abandoned you.”

Jack considered the man in front of him. The Doctor looked different. He couldn’t put his finger on it but it was there. He still thought it was after Canary Wharf, and having seen the lists he would have expected the Doctor to be devastated. He clearly wasn’t, but he could also sense that there was something else going on, something the Doctor hadn’t told him yet.

“Can she change me back?”

The Doctor shook his head. “I’m sorry.”

Jack could read sympathy in his eyes and knew the Time Lord meant it. He was talking to one of the very few beings in the universe who could truly understand what a curse an immortal life could be.

“Where is she?” he asked finally. He really didn’t want to dance around the topic of Canary Wharf the entire time.

“You didn’t see the lists?”

“Canary Wharf?”

“Yeah.” The Doctor’s voice sounded surprisingly calm.

“Was she...” Oh gods, please, don’t let her have been cyberised. He didn’t know if he could stand that. But if she was dead the Doctor would be devastated, like he had been on the Gamestation, during those moments when he’d thought that Rose was dead.

“She’s not dead, Jack.”

He closed his eyes briefly, thanking gods he had stopped believing in ages ago for their kindness. “Then what happened?”
“Your employer in their unfathomable wisdom decided that it would be a good idea to punch even more holes into the already damaged walls of the Void and let the Cybermen in. Mind you, not the Cybermen from this universe, which would have been bad enough; no, they opened a passage to a parallel world. Not to mention that they had a Void Ship containing the Cult of Skaro and a prison ship full of Daleks tucked away in one of their labs,” the Doctor replied sarcastically. “To get rid of them I had to open the Void again. She got sucked into a parallel universe.”

“Hey, I had nothing to do with what happened at Canary Wharf,” Jack protested. “I didn’t even want to see the reports.”

“You didn’t?”

Jack shook his head. “No Torchwood reports, no CCTV footage, nothing. Not after I had seen her name on the lists. She is the little sister I never had. I’ve lost so many people I love. I just couldn’t bear it. Knowing that she was dead was enough, I didn’t need to watch it happen.”

The Doctor nodded slowly.

“Why are you here, Doc?” Jack asked eventually.

“I suppose, telling you that I wanted to see you isn’t going to work?”

“No.” Jack crossed his arms.

“Thought so.” The Doctor looked slightly uncomfortable and sighed before he spoke again. “I need your help.”

Jack wasn’t stupid. There was only one possible reason why the Doctor would show up out of the blue, almost apologise for abandoning him, allow him to hit him and admit that he needed help.

“Let me see if I got this straight: You abandon me on Satellite Five because you want Rose to yourself and now you want my help to get her back?” Jack guessed.

“Pretty much sums it up, yeah,” the Doctor agreed.

“And why would I want to do that?”

“Because you’re a romantic at heart who can’t bear to see two lovers separated by the Void?” the Doctor asked casually.

It took a moment for the words to sink in, then Jack grinned. “You finally got it together!” he shouted gleefully.

“So are you gonna help me?” the Doctor asked grumpily.

“Of course. But only because it’s my only chance to find out how you’re in bed.”

“What?” The look on the Doctor’s face was priceless.

Jack laughed. “Don’t worry, Doc. I don’t wanna get into your pants. Mostly because Rose would probably kill me. And it’s much easier if I simply ask her.”

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“Please, Rose, for me?”
Rose could still hear her mum asking her if she would attend this Vitex party. Jackie had been nagging her for weeks, and eventually she had given in. She understood that her mum wanted her to be there, to celebrate Pete’s and her anniversary. To everyone else this was the foundation day of the Vitex Trust, but she was one of the five people in this universe who knew what the real occasion for the party was, and her mum had told her that she wanted the family to spend the day together, ‘family’ including Mickey and Jake.

Unfortunately that had led to another bout of motherly advice, or rather, meddling, at the breakfast table.

“You still need a dress, Rose. You can’t wear the one with the golden embroidery again, you know that. You’re a person of public interest, and people will think you’re wearing out last year’s fashion, or in this case, things that were in two years ago.”

“Mum, I like that dress, and I really don’t see why I should stuff my wardrobe with dresses I don’t wear anyway.” After her last few experiences with paparazzi following Mickey, Jake, and her all over London when they’d wanted nothing else than a few drinks in one of the hip clubs, she’d practically given up on going out, apart from an occasional pint or two in the pub most Torchwood agents visited after wrapping up assignments. Besides, she had the feeling that when she left this universe it would be with nothing but the things she wore at the time, and it would be for good. So stocking her wardrobe with dresses she’d never wear again seemed like a waste of time and money.

“Rose, please. People will talk. They’re already asking questions about you never going to Vitex parties. You’re supposed to be the Vitex heiress, you’ve got to act like that!”

“I’ve never wanted to be the Vitex heiress, Mum. If you’d listened to me, I’d just have been a distant cousin or something, and nobody would have been interested in me after a few weeks.”

“But you’re my daughter, Rose!”

“I know, Mum, and I love you. But this isn’t who I am, and I don’t want to pretend.” Keeping up the appearance that she was content with the life she led was hard enough at times; she didn’t need to be playing a high society girl on top of that.

Jackie took her hand. “Love, I know you miss the Doctor, and don’t think I didn’t know that you’re still looking for a way back to him. I don’t have to like it, because I don’t want to lose you; but I know you’ll find him one day, or maybe he’ll find you. But don’t you think he’d want you to live a life in the meantime?”

Rose stared at her for a moment. Could it be that she had forgotten the promise she’d given herself? To have a fantastic life? She’d buried herself in work and her studies, hidden away in the archives, looking for anything that might help her to get back to the Doctor. And somehow along the way she apparently had stopped living. How long since she had stopped to watch one of the street artists in front of the County Hall? How long since she had dropped onto a park bench to listen to a bird or watch a sunset?

She took a deep breath. “What do you think of a shopping trip after work tomorrow?”

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Standing on the staircase and nursing a glass of champagne, Rose observed the guests who had gathered again in small groups after dinner and remembered the last time she had worn a scarlet dress.
After they’d become lovers the Doctor had asked her for a proper date, much to her astonishment, and even promised an evening without running. She hadn’t expected him to do something this domestic and had joked that they seemed to be doing it wrong: living together, eventually becoming lovers and then having a proper date, but he had insisted and told her to go to the wardrobe room.

When she had got there, the TARDIS had already laid out a dress: scarlet silk, knee-long with trumpet sleeves and a deep neckline, and with something Rose could only describe as a merry flicker the ship had directed her attention towards the matching ballerina shoes that would allow her to run. She had laughed and donned the dress. Back in the console room, the Doctor had looked at her for a full minute without being able to say something. Then he had taken her arm and led her outside.

He had actually booked a table in a very nice restaurant on Augusta Prime, but unfortunately they’d had an infestation of Treluvian Fireflies who’d tried to take over the entire gastronomy industry on the planet. Of course they’d had to run before they’d even got to the first course. Afterwards he’d tried to apologise, but she’d told him that it wouldn’t have been them if there hadn’t been any running involved. That night he had finally made love to her without a sign of the desperation that had driven him the times before.

A jostle by a rather large woman she had never seen before brought her out of her reverie.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I was looking for the restrooms.” She pressed a hand against her body. “It seems I can’t stomach the oysters.”

“I know the feeling,” Rose said sympathetically. “Go back to the main entrance, then turn into the corridor on the right. It’s the first door on the right hand.”

“Thank you.” Her relief was palpable.

“You’re welcome.”

Rose let her gaze drift over the guests once more, until she finally discovered the familiar faces of Mickey and Jake, the two other ‘family members’ Jackie had invited. Since this was supposed to be a formal Vitex dinner, they hadn’t been seated at the main table, much to Rose’s disappointment, and she had lost them in the crowd afterwards. She observed Mickey talking to one of Pete’s business partners, and the man vanished in the direction of the main entrance.

She left her position on the staircase and made her way over to Mickey and Jake, intent on persuading one of them to dance with her. Having brought a new dress for the occasion meant it had to be taken out for a spin, didn’t it? And since she was here she might as well have fun.

In coming nearer, she saw yet another man turning to Jake for advice; and if she had seen correctly, he was directed towards the entrance, then right. It stuck her briefly as odd, but she shook the feeling off. When she had reached them she raised an eyebrow at Jake questioningly.

Jake shrugged. “Maybe something wrong with the oysters? This was the third person asking us for the restrooms.”

“No,” Mickey said. “I had them, too, and I’m feeling well.”

Rose grinned. “That could be because you basically eat anything, Mick, including pickled eggs.”

Jake mocked vomiting, but then became serious again. “No, seriously, Rose. I saw your mum having oysters, too, and she’s fine.”

Rose slowly came to the conclusion that something wasn’t right. She didn’t know what it was, not
yet anyway, but something was definitely wrong here. “Jake, have any of the persons you sent to the restrooms come out yet?”

Jake shook his head. “Now you’re asking: None of them. Odd.”

Slowly the pieces began to form a picture — and Rose got a suspicion. “Mick, can you charm Mrs Jamison out of two or three bottles of vinegar?”

“Sure. But why?”

“Because what’s happening here sounds like the Raxacoricofallapatorians all over again.”

Mickey and Jake looked at her questioningly. “The what?” they asked in unison.

“Remember the day you hacked into the weapons control of a submarine and fired a cruise missile at 10, Downing Street, Mick?”

Mickey grinned. “Sure. You’re thinking it’s the aliens with zippers on their heads?”

“I dunno why, but it reminds me of them, yeah.”

“And what are we gonna do, Rose?” Jake asked.

“Wanna cause a scandal, Jake?”

“Oh, why not.” He grinned at her.
Chapter Fifteen

The Doctor stared at the monitor, desperately trying to analyse what he was seeing and mostly failing. Seeing the CCTV footage from Torchwood tower brought it all back. He clutched the mug of tea Jack had made during his second review as if it was a lifeline. Rationally he knew it was stupid, but he had caught himself hoping that this time Rose’s grip on the lever wouldn’t slip, that replaying the events would lead to a different outcome.

He pressed the replay button, his attention focused on the screen that showed footage of the Void Ship and only dimly aware of Jack watching him from the jump seat. Something was off, he was certain of it, even if he couldn’t put his finger on it.

He turned around and faced Jack. “You know, Rose asked a couple of very clever questions about the Void.”

“So? Wait, when? I wouldn’t have thought she’d had the time during the battle.”

The Doctor sighed. Not that it really mattered right now, but if he didn’t answer Jack’s questions the lad would pester him endlessly. “Time Lords have this little trick. If we desire so, we can establish a bond with our beloved ones. It’s extremely rare, and it hasn’t happened for millennia, but it enables us to meet at a place between dimensions. I’ve never heard of it working when the partners are in different universes, but with the help of the TARDIS it somehow does.”

Jack grinned. “Don’t tell me you can have inter-dimensional…”

He had the feeling that Jack was going to say something extremely inappropriate, but whatever it was, the sentence was interrupted when the TARDIS door opened and Donna appeared, her arms full of shopping bags.

“You owe me big time, you know,” she said, completely ignoring the other man in the room. “Cardiff is probably the most boring town I’ve ever been to.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that,” Jack threw in. “At the moment we have a Weevil infestation and last week we had a shape-shifting alien that tried to kill half of my team. And it looks like you found a couple of shops anyway.” He glanced at her bags. “Even if there are better lingerie shops than the one you chose.”

Donna looked up and down his body appraisingly. “And you are?”

“That, Donna, is Jack Harkness,” the Doctor said.

“Captain Jack Harkness.” Jack sent Donna a megawatt-smile.

The Doctor recognised the signs immediately. “Stop it, Jack!”

“What? I’m just saying hello.”

“I know your hellos, Jack.” The Doctor sighed and turned to Donna. “Jack’s probably the biggest flirt in the universe.” Turning back to Jack he added, “Jack, meet Donna, biggest slap in the universe.”

Jack broke into laughter. “You must have made quite an impression on him. Formerly that nickname was reserved for Jackie Tyler.”
“Well, he deserved one for getting me imprisoned in the Tower,” Donna informed him conspiratorially.

Jack laughed harder. “You did what, Doc?”

The Doctor shook his head, wondering if he could get away with accidently getting Jack arrested on Noia Five. The bureaucrats on this planet were the most annoying he had ever come across, and that included the pompous versions on Gallifrey. Noia Five had laws on everything, including flirting and handholding. As he had found out the hard way, it was only allowed if one had written permission of the guardian of the woman in question, in triplicate. He had never told Rose, but the lack thereof had been what had got them arrested there, not crossing the street. Although, knowing Jack, he would probably just introduce one of the guards to fifty-first century pheromones and be out of the prison before someone could say Raxacoricofallapatorious.

“Yeah, well, if we could get back to the problem at hand,” he grumbled. “And don’t call me Doc, Jack!”

“And what exactly is the problem?” Donna asked.

“Getting Rose back, without destroying two universes in the process,” Jack informed her.

“You know her?”

Jack grinned. “Met her during the Blitz. She was dangling from a barrage balloon in the middle of an air raid.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. The most jeopardy-friendly girl I’ve ever seen. And since the Doctor wants her back…”

“Yes, I do. And I’d really appreciate it if we could concentrate on that,” the Doctor interrupted. He pointed at the monitor still showing a freeze frame of the Void Ship. “Something about this thing is off, but I don’t know what it is.”

“And what exactly is that thing?” Donna asked. “It just looks like a rather large sphere.”

“It’s called a Void Ship. Until I’d seen it in the lab I hadn’t even thought it was possible. It should have been impossible. But somehow they built one…” He trailed off.

“So what does it do?” If anything, Donna was stubborn. “And who are they?”

“The scientists on my planet theorised that a Void Ship would be able to travel through the Void, the emptiness between parallel universes. Most of them didn’t think it was possible. I didn’t think it was possible until I’d seen it. And I’ve no idea who they are.” He pressed the play button, and the sphere opened, released a group of Daleks and eventually dissolved into thin air.

“But what about the Daleks?” Donna pointed at the screen. If Jack was surprised Donna knew about them, he didn’t comment.

“The Daleks? Donna, I’ve told you before. All they ever wanted was to destroy every race that was not like them.” He spit out the words, his eyes never leaving the screen. “They don’t have enough imagination to come up with the theory of trans-dimensional travel.”

“Well, where did the sphere come from, then?”
The Doctor stared at the monitor. “No idea.”

“You said, Rose had asked questions about what happened at Canary Wharf?” Jack threw in.

“Not so much about Canary Wharf, more what had caused the cracks in the other universe. We don’t think it’s the Cybermen. They have even less imagination than the Daleks. It’s a wonder they found a way into the Void in the first place, let alone to this universe, even without Torchwood helping them along.”

“Yvonne Hartman was an idiot,” Jack said. “But I don’t think she did have anything to do with the cracks.”

“You’re right, Jack, she didn’t, at least not with their origin. But I think I know whose fault it is,” the Doctor said slowly. “At least I know who made them possible.”

“And that is?” Donna asked.

“Me.” He was still looking at the monitor, though without actually seeing the scene displayed there. “When I used the Moment to end the Time War, it sent repercussions through time and space, like a shock wave. That must have caused tiny ruptures. But none of them would have been big enough to let something like the Void ship through, until Torchwood in their unfathomable wisdom decided to use the cracks as an energy source.”

“Doctor,” Donna said slowly, “didn’t the trader say something about a shock wave?”

He turned around and stared at her. “Of course. He was displaced in time! I’ve been stupid.”

“Hear, hear.” That was Jack.

“Shut it. I’m thinking.” He turned back to the console and typed a few commands.

“You’re not exactly polite,” Donna admonished.

“Jack’s not exactly polite either,” he gave back distractedly, still typing. A few seconds later long rows of figures replaced the footage of the lab in Torchwood Tower.

“Is that…” Jack suddenly stood next to him.

“That’s the function describing the multi-dimensional trajectory of the shock wave I caused when I used the Moment.” Another command, and the monitor showed a simulation of the wave. He followed its course, citing some of the various star systems it had hit. “The Denerian star cluster, the Reneb system, Xeriax.” He paused. “Why does it ring a bell? Xeriax.”

“In the Time Agency I heard stories about the system,” Jack threw in. “Some people said it was haunted. No one believed them, but according to the reports I saw, at least two time agents vanished there without a trace, on one of the outer planets. We never found out why.”

“Time agents vanished… Time… Wait! That’s it! Time vanished!” the Doctor exclaimed, only to meet confused faces.

“How can time vanish?” Donna asked.

“It doesn’t. It’s a metaphor, Donna. When I was a child, the teachers in the Academy told us that Xeriax was off-limits, because Time didn’t work there like anywhere else, that it would feel as if the timelines had evaporated. That must have been a result of the shock wave. No Time Lord with self-
preservation instincts would ever go somewhere where their time sense could get confused, and according to the stories we were told that’s what happened to an entire group of Time Lords when they visited Xerix. From what I remember, the Xerian people were able to influence time in a way only a Time Lord normally would be able to, and they were said to have crossed dimensions.

“They crossed dimensions? But how?” Jack asked.

A strange light began to glow the Doctor’s eyes. “Let’s find out!”

He began to turn knobs and dials, only to be interrupted by his companion just when he was about to loosen the handbrake.

“Doctor, there’s one thing I don’t get. If the shock wave changed the laws of time or whatever on Xerox, and you are the one who caused it, how can you have heard of the results as a child?”

“Because time is not a straight line, Donna,” Jack explained. “Just think of it as…”

“…a big ball of wibbly-wobbly-timey-whimsey stuff,” the Doctor continued the sentence.

“Wibbly-wobbly-timey-whimsey?” Jack asked sceptically. “Is that a technical term?”

“Of course!” the Doctor replied indignantly, his hands still at the handbrake. “Are you ready?”

“Wait, Doc! Didn’t you say a Time Lord with self-preservation instincts would never go there?”

A manic smile appeared on the Doctor’s face. “Ah.”

“But…” Jack never got to finish his sentence.

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Rose Tyler, Vitex heiress, tumbled into the restroom, hair mussed, dress slightly disarranged. Two men were following closely behind, ties loosened, shirts partly unbuttoned. When the door closed behind them, she looked up, taking in the scene in front of her. Several people in various states of undress occupied the room, ‘undress’ including body suits being removed and revealing an appearance that struck her very Slitheen. A loud fart followed by a complaint about the lack of appropriate compression technology and problems with the gas exchange confirmed her suspicions.

“Looks like the orgy already started without us, boys.” With that she straightened, Mickey and Jake taking positions slightly behind and to the side.

“Yeah, but we’ll make sure it doesn’t end without us!” Mickey drew out two bright red water pistols he’d been hiding in his jacket. “Good thing that Tony leaves his toys everywhere, including the kitchen.”

Rose grinned, her eyes never leaving the group of aliens in front of her. “Mum told Pete that Tony wasn’t old enough to play with water pistols, but maybe she was wrong.”

“State name, species and planet of origin!” Jake said, addressing the alien in front of him that was yielding a dangerous looking weapon. “And intent, while we’re at it!”

“And why would I do that?” the being that looked like the spitting image of a Slitheen asked.

“You’re nothing more than cubs playing at my feet, not even worth being hunted. Do you really think your toys are going to scare us with toys?” He gestured at the water pistols Mickey was holding.
“You didn’t really think we’d fill them with water, did you? That’s vinegar essence. Ever seen what acetic acid does to calcium-based species? Not a pretty sight,” Rose said.

“I take the risk.” He raised his weapon higher, so she was looking down the muzzle. She’d never really liked the view.

“Mate, one unforgettable night I exploded one of your sort in my kitchen with acetic acid. Took me months to get the stain out of the curtains,” Mickey said.

“Mick, that’s more because you don’t know how to operate a washing machine,” Jake threw in.

“And you’re not the only one wearing a weapon.” He pulled out two extra-terrestrial looking weapons and passed one to Rose.

She looked at the gun for a moment and recognised the design instantly. “Villengard? You’ve got a sonic blaster from Villengard?” She felt for a certain switch Jack had once shown her, checked the setting and adjusted it slightly.

“Yeah. We found it on a crash site a few years ago. And the best thing is, the techies improved the energy yield. You can take down an entire battalion of Cybermen with one of these babies without draining the energy cell.”

“Hey, why didn’t you tell me you had those?” Mickey asked indignantly.

“Because I knew Rose would need a weapon, too.”

“Yeah, ever tried to hide a gun under a dress like this?” she asked an alien that looked rather female, despite the really large gun she was holding.

Her opponent nodded sympathetically, only to return to her threatening demeanour.

Jake grinned briefly, his eyes never leaving what seemed to be the leader of the group. “Right, where were we? Oh yes, you were going to tell me what your intentions are.”

“Or else we’re gonna turn you into alien goo,” added Mickey.

“Oh, I don’t think so,” the leader of the group responded, raising his gun, his finger slowly moving towards the trigger.

Rose didn’t hesitate for a second. She aimed the blaster at his hand and pressed the button. He dropped the gun, rubbing the hand that had been holding the weapon with the other.

“That was the lowest stun setting,” she said. “Paralyses one limb for a few minutes. The highest blaster setting would turn you into atoms. This is not a game. Tell us name, species and intention.”

Her opponent practically growled. “We are the Chaskeen, and your species is going to bring our slave trade business to new prosperity. Celebrities, even if from another planet, reach high prices on Thalor Seven, and politicians sell even better. A few humans are not going to stop us.”

Rose sighed theatrically. “Another universe, same difference. It all comes down to money.” She paused briefly. “But unfortunately you made a mistake.”

“Oh yes, you did. You chose the wrong party to crash,” a voice Rose recognised immediately as Pete’s interrupted her from behind. She suspected her stepfather had entered the room while she had been busy paralysing the alien. “You really shouldn’t have tried to revive your business by intruding on my wedding anniversary. My wife is furious. And you have no idea what it means if Jackie Tyler
“Yeah, the Doctor is still rubbing his cheek,” Rose muttered to herself.

“Well, it’s not as if he didn’t deserve it,” Mickey murmured.

Rose glared at him.

“At this point she wants your heads on her wall,” Pete continued, ignoring them, “even if it will ruin my living room. With a bit of luck I can persuade her that photos of your dead bodies in her album will do, too, but I’m making no promises.”

“And you’ll get our heads by what means exactly?” the leader of the alien group asked, still rubbing his arm. “You’ll never be able to get all of us, before the survivors would kill you.” He gestured awkwardly, and the aliens raised their weapons at Rose. “One move and we’ll shoot your daughter!” Apparently the Chaskeen had done their research.

Pete didn’t even blink an eye. “No, you won’t.” He pressed a button on his watch. “Team One, Team Two, now!”

Suddenly the window in the back of the room shattered and a man in Torchwood combat dress entered the room, followed by another, while the other members of the team covered them from the outside. At the same time the door crashed open and a second Torchwood reaction unit entered the restroom through the door.

“Drop your weapons or we’ll shoot!” the commander in charge ordered, while two of his team members shoved Rose, Mickey and Jake into the background.

The Chaskeen leader slowly raised his hands.

Three hours later Rose, Jake, and Mickey sat in Pete’s office at the mansion, waiting for him. He had ordered them here as soon as the remaining guests and the last Torchwood agents had left the estate.

Eventually they heard footsteps outside the door, and Pete mumbling something, then he entered the room, closing the door behind him. With four long steps he surrounded his desk and faced them.

“Do you have any idea what you’ve done?” he asked, sounding tired.

“Yes, sir,” Jake replied. “We stopped a couple of aliens from selling your guests as slaves.”

“No, you didn’t! Instead of calling for reinforcements and letting Torchwood handle the situation, you went into a completely unknown and potentially hostile situation armed just with two sonic blasters and two water pistols, of all things!” he shouted. “What the hell were you thinking? Do you have any idea of the political fall-out you’ve caused? To the press, and don’t tell me you didn’t notice the paparazzi, it looked as if Torchwood agents arrested three influential MPs, the Mayor of London and the bleeding Education Secretary.”

Outside the door there was a noise, but Pete ignored it and continued, “You can count yourself lucky that I saw you entering the restroom and called the cavalry when I heard what was going on, or you’d be dead right now. They had a bomb, and one of them was working on activating it, when the combat teams stormed the room. Have you never heard of back-up or reconnaissance?”

“Pete, we thought we should take a look, because a few of the guests were behaving weird. We just
wanted to find out what was happening before calling in Torchwood,” Jake said.

Unfortunately that didn’t calm Pete in the slightest. “This was the most irresponsible thing I’ve ever heard of. If we weren’t so short on personnel, I’d fire all of you. You will ride a desk for the next month. At least that should give you the chance to catch up on the paper work you seem to conveniently forget about whenever you finish a mission.” He took a breath. “And if something even remotely like this happens ever again, I’ll fire you, shortage of agents or not.”

In the following silence, Rose could hear footsteps outside the door that eventually receded.

“I’m sorry,” she apologised. “We didn’t want to ruin your party. Mickey, Mum and I had a run in with this species before, and we thought the vinegar and the sonic weapons would be enough firepower, especially since we weren’t even sure what was going on. I mean, it could have just been guests who had eaten something wrong, and calling Torchwood for that would have been overkill.”

“Apology accepted.” Pete sat down behind his desk and grinned suddenly. “And to be honest, I’m not really mad. That was just for Jacks.” He nodded towards the door and the now-quiet hallway beyond. “But you’ll still be confined to your desk for the next month.”

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The Doctor glared at his ship. His companions hadn’t noticed yet, but for the last twenty minutes the TARDIS had been fighting him tooth and nail, so to speak. She didn’t want to land, and she made her opinion known rather thoroughly. But even if she didn’t want to land here, he didn’t care. If Xeriax and their dimension crossing technology gave him a chance to get Rose back, he would take it, despite the ideas his decidedly stubborn time ship seemed to be having.

Half an hour later, after subsequently cursing her, threatening to fix the chameleon circuit and make her look like a grandfather clock, cursing her, promising to upgrade her navigation system, cursing her, and swearing that he’d been joking about fixing the chameleon circuit, the TARDIS finally relented. Of course that didn’t stop her from acting like any annoyed female would have done: she dumped them in an alley that looked decidedly like a junkyard.

As soon as he opened the TARDIS door, the Doctor knew Xeriax was wrong, and when he set foot on the planet he knew why. It was as if Time had vanished here, like the legends had said. He could still feel the timelines, but he couldn’t connect to them, as if they were out of reach somehow. It felt as if he was suffocating slowly. He closed his eyes and concentrated for a moment, but it didn’t change how he felt. If this planet’s technology didn’t give him a chance to get Rose back, he’d be initiating the dematerialisation sequence this second.

He took a deep breath and adjusted his leather jacket, then turned back to his companions who were still standing in the doorframe of his ship. “You lot coming? We don’t have all day.” He still had the nagging feeling that he shouldn’t be here, or at least that they should leave the planet as soon as possible.

“Relax, Doc. Time machine, remember? What about some sightseeing? On a planet you don’t already know everything about before we’ve even landed.” Jack grinned. “Besides, how long have you been separated from Rose? A few hours more won’t kill you.”

“Jack…” His voice was low and threatening, but before he could say more he was interrupted by Donna.

“Do you think they’ve got a market?” she asked, shoving Jack out the doorway so she could leave the ship, whose doors closed behind her immediately.
The Doctor could almost hear crossbars falling in place, securing the doors. Apparently his ship was still annoyed, and he doubted that would change anytime soon. They’d be lucky if she let them in again.

“Donna, you went shopping in Cardiff. Don’t you think that should last for a while?”

“That’s the point, Doctor. I had to go shopping in Cardiff. It’s not exactly Rome or Paris!”

He could feel a slight headache building behind his eyes and sighed. When exactly had his life become an intergalactic shopping tour? Even if he hadn’t minded shopping with Rose. Not much, anyway. But spending more time here than absolutely necessary was bound to drive him crazy. He could barely suppress the urge to leave this planet immediately. “Tell you what, you and Jack go shopping and I find out more about that dimension crossing technology. Should save us some time.”

He stomped off without another word, his hands buried deep in his jacket. As soon as he left the alley and entered the street, he could feel the blazing sun glaring down on him. In the alley, the shadows of the surrounding buildings had protected them, but here the temperature already was reaching a level that would soon become uncomfortable for his companions, even if it was still early in the morning. Oh well, this was supposed to be a highly evolved planet. They’d have air-conditioned shopping centres.

Humans! If the universe didn’t revolve around them, they became like a three-year old who’d lost his favourite teddy and threw a temper tantrum. He shook his head. This planet was grating on his nerves, and his headache seemed to be getting stronger. He knew he was being unfair, but he couldn’t help it. Everything felt just wrong, more wrong than Jack ever had. As much as he tried, he just couldn’t see the timelines properly, and that was supposed to be impossible. No wonder the Time Lords had declared this planet off limits.

The Doctor hadn’t exactly paid attention to the direction in which he was going, but after a while he realised that he was definitely not approaching the city centre. Industrial areas looked the same in every part of the universe, slightly run down even if they were brand new, but the one he’d found himself in was more than a little run down. Factory buildings with broken windows, rusty company signs and fences, road holes; everything gave the impression that it had been left a few decades ago. He rubbed his forehead. On every other planet he’d have been able to tell how old the surrounding buildings were, how long they’d been in use, and when they’d been deserted. Not that he normally cared, but he could find out if he wanted. On this planet all he could see was a group of buildings sitting, truncated, in only three dimensions, temporally incomplete.

But even if the industrial area looked deserted, it had something that passed for a public information terminal on Xerax. The column was rusty, and the screen had a large crack, but the monitor on the column slowly flickered to life when the Doctor touched the keyboard. A few minutes later he had a basic overview of the planet’s history, the current developments in the commodities market, and the latest political manoeuvres of the governing party. What he didn’t have was a clue where to look for the dimension-crossing technology. Whenever he looked up a terminus related to parallel worlds, he came up with literally nothing. It looked like the data banks had been wiped, because nothing was next to impossible. He’d never come across a culture at a certain evolutionary level that hadn’t come up with a couple of science fiction stories about alternate universes. Apart from maybe the Cybermen, who lacked the imagination, and the Sontarans, who had bred the interest in stories out of their genetic code ages ago.

But then it was also impossible to wipe a database without leaving traces. And if he found those he’d find the people responsible for deleting the data, and he was fairly certain that they’d lead him to the technology he was looking for. He pointed the sonic screwdriver at the information terminal and
“Stubborn alien git!” Donna glared at the Doctor’s retreating back.

Jack changed a setting on his Vortex manipulator and narrowed his eyes. “He’ll calm down eventually. I guess this planet is grating on his nerves.” He showed her the screen of his manipulator. “See?”

She looked at the tiny monitor and turned her glare at Jack. “What exactly should I see on a black screen, Captain?”

“That’s exactly the point, Donna, it shouldn’t be black. On any other planet you would see a simplified illustration of the Time Vortex, but here we don’t.”

“And what does that mean?”

“For the Doctor, it means that he can’t feel Time like he usually does, as if he was blind and deaf at the same time,” Jack explained. “For us, nothing in particular.”

Unfortunately that wasn’t the entire truth. Even if the TARDIS had repaired his Vortex manipulator, without a reading he wasn’t able to make a time jump. Jack just hoped that didn’t apply to the TARDIS as well, because then they’d be stuck here. And he had the dim feeling that this wasn’t exactly one of the universe’s most interesting spots.

He put up a grin that was only partly faked and held out his arm to Donna. “Care to explore the planet for a while?”

When they reached the street they quickly discovered that the Doctor seemed to have vanished. Jack shrugged. “City centre is that way.” He pointed.

“Don’t you think we should look for the Doctor?”

“There’s no need. Knowing the Doctor, he’ll find us eventually. Besides, I can imagine better ways to spend my time than dragging along a Time Lord in that sort of mood.” He grinned at Donna and offered her his arm. “Shopping?”
Chapter Summary

A storm is brewing...

The shopping centre was surprisingly empty. So was the entire city, now Jack came to think of it. There had been only a few native Xerians and humanoids from other planets on the streets, and even less non-humanoid species. According to the information terminal he had consulted earlier, Xerix had trade agreements with several other planets in this quadrant. The city they were currently visiting was one of the largest on the planet, and served as a large cultural and governmental centre. According to the posters he had seen outside, a few hundred thousand tourists were expected to visit the opening of the cultural festival that would start tomorrow, but he had only seen a few dozen people outside. Something was going on here. He didn’t know what it was, but he intended to find out.

“What do you think about an early lunch, Donna?” he asked when he discovered a small café that was completely deserted, save for the barman and two waiters. One of them was Terraxian, and the fact that his skin was tinged greenish-blue gave away that he was afraid of something. The other waiter just looked as if he was to bolt any second.

“I’m not really hungry, but I would kill for something to drink,” she gave back, wiping her forehead with a tissue. “I don’t think the air conditioning is working. It’s almost as hot inside as it is outside.”

It was warm in the shopping centre, but Jack had always thought that some shops on 21th century Earth overdid it with the air conditioning. He really didn’t like to go shopping in a freezer. “At least we won’t have the feeling of running into a solid wall of heat when we leave the building,” he said. “What do you think about the café over there?”

“Looks good to me.”

They ordered, and after a few minutes the waiter returned with their beverages. Jack waited patiently until Donna had finished about half of her drink, then he asked the question that had been nagging him since Cardiff.

“I’ve been meaning to ask you. You had a run-in with Daleks?”

Donna avoided his eyes and adjusted her glass of juice on the drip mat, but nodded eventually. Judging from her reaction it had been pretty bad, and knowing the Doctor, Jack suspected he afterwards had avoided the topic altogether. Donna really looked as if she needed someone to talk to.

“What happened?”

She took a sip of her drink and placed the glass carefully on the table, then she looked at him again. “I don’t know why, but one moment we were standing in the galley and he was telling me we were going to Cardiff, the next something hit us and the TARDIS went out of control.”

“Something hit you? In the Time Vortex? That’s supposed to be impossible!”
Donna laughed bitterly. “That’s what he said. And then the TARDIS crash-landed us on the Dalek homeworld. We needed something to fix her, but she couldn’t get us anywhere near. On our way back I got captured. All I did was walk around a rock nose because I’d heard something.”

“And what did the Doctor do?”

“I don’t know. All I know is that I spent a week imprisoned in a slave camp where they used children as mine workers and in the process starved them to death. He finally showed up while one of the humanoids working for the Daleks was torturing me.”

“Let me guess. He went all Oncoming Storm on them? You know, this thing he does. ‘This ends. Here and now,’” Jack said in his best imitation of a Northern accent. “And afterwards the baddies hide in dark caves or under the nearest table and hope he lets them live.”

Donna smiled briefly at his imitation of a Mancunian accent, but quickly became serious again. “We got the slaves out, and then he told me that he was going to kill each and every Dalek in creation and send the planet back into the Middle Age.” She gulped. “He was… He didn’t care that he would kill not only the Daleks, but eventually also those people we had just freed. I’d never seen anyone so full of hatred before…” She trailed off.

Jack nodded. “He was like that when the Daleks took Rose from him for the first time… I’ve never been so afraid of someone in my life.” He shuddered at the memory of the look on the Doctor’s face when they’d found out that the Daleks were behind the Game Station.

“I… I told him I wouldn’t let him, that it was wrong, but he only gave me this look… You know, the one that makes you think that you’re nothing more than an insect in his eyes.” Donna adjusted her glass on the drip mat once more, then looked back at Jack. “He said he was going to change history, and I don’t even know why, but I told him I’d let him do it if he could tell me that Rose would agree. The look on his face when I brought her up…” She shuddered. “I was certain he’d kill me. But then he stopped. I still don’t know why, but he stopped.”

Jack took her hand. “You did what you had to do, Donna, what was right. Rose did the same for him. He doesn’t think clearly whenever it comes to Daleks, and then he needs someone who makes him see reason. Ever since I met him in 1941 I’ve thought one of the reasons he keeps us around is that we’re supposed to stop him if necessary. I don’t think we’ve already seen what being a Time Lord really means, and to be honest, I hope I’ll never find out.” He paused, then smiled at her. “And I bet he didn’t even apologise.”

She smiled back, albeit a bit shakily. “Of course not! I was planning on guilt-tripping him into a visit to a spa planet, but then we ended up in Cardiff!”

“Cardiff is not that bad!”

They bantered back and forth until they had finished their drinks, and Jack signalled for the bill.

When the Terraxian waiter returned with it, Jack asked him, “I would have thought it was more crowded today, what with the festival beginning tomorrow.”

The waiter stared at him in astonishment, his skin suddenly sporting yellow dots, even if the underlying colouring of fear didn’t change. “Where are you from that you don’t know the festival has been cancelled?”

“Oh, we’ve been travelling without access to the networks and have only returned today,” Jack replied, waving his hand dismissively. “So what happened?”
“You must be the only persons on the entire planet who don’t know. And they force us to work until three hours before shutdown.”


“A storm is coming,” the waiter replied, took his tray, returned to the bar, dropped the tray on the counter and walked out of the little café.

Donna looked at Jack in confusion. “What does he mean, a storm? Something like a tornado?”

“I don’t know, but maybe we should find out.”

It took them only minutes to find an information terminal, and Jack touched the universally recognised symbol for weather.

A window opened, and a slightly green looking humanoid appeared on the screen. “The Meteorological Service has issued a class seven storm warning for the capital for today at 19 standard hours. The government asks everyone to leave the city, and where not possible, to seek shelter. The Meteorological Service will open their bunkers today at 12 standard hours.” It was almost imperceptible, but his voice was shaking slightly.

19 standard hours was less than five hours away. Suddenly Jack Harkness, former time agent, former con-man, immortal, and currently leader of Torchwood Three was very, very scared.

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The Doctor looked up from the monitor of the information portal and rubbed his forehead in frustration. His headache was getting worse, and he was getting nowhere with the information he was looking for. Whoever had purged the database had been extremely clever and covered their tracks. He was fairly certain that the government was involved in this, since an outside job would have left traces no matter what. Something was going on here, and he intended to find out.

He wondered briefly if he should go back to the TARDIS and let her scan for the technology he was looking for, but he was fairly certain that she was still furious with him and wouldn’t let him in. With a sigh he turned back to the information portal.

Five minutes later he had just discovered something that looked like it might actually give him an idea of the whereabouts of whoever had cleansed the database, when he heard a hover car stopping behind him.

“Sir, please step away from the information terminal and raise your hands, so we can see them,” a female voice said.

The Doctor silently cursed himself. He must have triggered an alarm in the system, maybe even before he had started hacking, just by using the search engine. He turned around and faced the humanoid female who had addressed him. Two uniformed Xerians were standing behind a hover car, training weapons at him, while the woman approached him, an official looking document in her hands.

“Sir, you are arrested under section 63/45 of the Restricted Information Policy Act. You will be taken into custody until the prosecutor decides whether you will be charged with a crime or not. If you put up resistance, the officers behind me will make use of their weapons.”

The Doctor sighed. Was it really too much to ask for one trip where everything went to plan? Land, find whatever spare part or information he was looking for, dematerialise. But no, by landing on
Xeriax he had not only pissed off his TARDIS, he also had acquired a killer headache, got himself arrested, and still had no idea where to look for the information he needed. He slowly raised his hands.

A short trip in the hover car later, he found himself sitting on a narrow bed in a small prison cell in a building that according to the signs belong to Xeriax’s meteorological service, which in and of itself made no sense whatsoever. But then, the entire planet didn’t. No wonder the Time Lords had declared it off-limits. His inability to perceive Time like he should was grating on his nerves, and the slight headache he had been developing as soon as he had set foot on the planet was slowly reaching dimensions where it would be measurable on the Richter scale. He rubbed his forehead in frustration. Maybe the TARDIS had had a point in refusing to bring them here.

In a probably futile attempt to distract himself from the headache that just wouldn’t leave him alone, he started to summarize what he knew. Point: Xeriax had been declared off-limits by the Time Lords because Time behaved strange here. Point: He remembered that Xeriax was known for its dimension-crossing technology. Point: There had been absolutely no evidence related to dimension-crossing technology in the databases, which screamed government at him. Point: He was in a prison that belonged to the meteorological service. Point: The meteorological service was part of the government.

Which brought him to the conclusion that this prison was most likely the place where he ought to be. The Doctor made himself comfortable on the bed, crossed his long legs and decided to wait for the things that would happen eventually while trying to ignore the headache that was getting worse by the second. Especially since staging a break out was much easier when he wasn’t lacking his leather jacket and the sonic.

Some time passed, but to his utter dismay he couldn’t tell exactly how long it had been since the guards had dropped him unceremoniously here. This planet was driving him crazy, slowly, but steadily. Not being able to perceive Time like usual was bad enough, but now the planet was starting to wreak havoc with his time sense. As much as he loathed admitting it, the TARDIS had been right about Xeriax. Now she would be insufferably smug for weeks.

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Jack’s shoulders slumped in despair. Ages ago, when the three of them had visited Cardiff for the first time, he’d programmed the number of the Doctor’s mobile into his vortex manipulator, but the number hadn’t worked ever since the Game Station. He hadn’t even known if the Doctor still had the mobile and had purposefully ignored his calls after Satellite Five or if the device had been destroyed, but this time he had really hoped for an answer, especially since it was possible that the Doctor didn’t even know what was coming.

“And what do we do now?” Donna asked.

“Back to the TARDIS. She’s probably the safest place in the entire town.”

“Why? I mean, even if she’s bigger on the inside, the outside is nothing more than wood.”

Jack shook his head. “The outside may look like wood, but it’s anything but, and the inside is in another dimension. Otherwise the whole concept wouldn’t work. Whatever happens here, it won’t affect us if we are inside.” Apparently Donna hadn’t got the infamous ‘the assembled hordes of Genghis Khan’ speech yet.

“But what about the people in the city?”
“Donna, they’ve got bunkers. They will be safe inside.” He hoped. Remembering the slight tremble in the voice of the news anchorman, he wasn’t so sure.

They were halfway to the TARDIS, when suddenly a little boy barrelled headfirst into Donna. She stumbled, and Jack could only just stop her from falling.

The boy had hit the ground, but he already straightened himself, mumbled a quick “Sorry” and was about to bolt, when Jack caught his wrist.

“Do you always run across the streets like a horde of wild…?” One look into the boy’s face, and Jack swallowed the end of his sentence. “What’s wrong?” he asked instead, releasing him.

“I have to find Uncle Sergos. He has promised to help me with my mum. I can’t get her to the bunker on my own. She’s got a broken leg.”

Jack sighed. “So… What’s your name?”

“Artor.”

“So, Artor, where do you live?”

It took them ten minutes to get to Artor’s flat. His mum, who greeted them from her bed, was unable to walk more than a few steps, and on seeing their worn-down furniture Jack quickly buried his hope to find an anti-grav unit. One of those would have cost a lot more than the family could have afforded. So Jack improvised a transport frame that would allow him to carry her to the bunker, while Donna collected her medicine and Artor grabbed a few clothes and his favourite toy.

“I can’t thank you enough for doing this!” Artor’s mum, Seri, said when Jack told her that they were ready to go. “Most people would have ignored my son.”

Donna smiled at her. “Artor was very brave, going after someone who could help him. It just happened that we were much nearer to your flat than whoever he was looking for.”

Seri nodded. “Sergos. He is my brother-in-law. My husband died in an accident last year, and Sergos has been helping us whenever we needed someone. But he has his own family to look after.”

Ten minutes later, Jack held up the finished transport device. “Nothing fancy, but it’ll get you to the bunker.”

It took them twenty minutes to reach their destination, through almost deserted streets. They saw several people going the same way, while others were heading in the opposite direction, mostly elderly Xerians. Jack frowned at the sight. Something was going on here, and he had the dim feeling he wouldn’t like it.

After half an hour of queuing in front of the entrance to the bunker, he discovered that he had been right. He didn’t like it one bit.

“Identification,” a male Xerian with official looking insignia sneered at their little group, like he had at every group before.

Jack groaned inwardly, and produced his psychic paper.

“Harkness,” the official read. “That your wife?” He looked at Donna.

“My sister,” he lied smoothly. Thankfully he had centuries of experience of keeping his face straight,
because Donna stomped on his feet. Hard.

“And the others?”

Serì fumbled in her pocket and presented hers and Artor’s identification.

The official looked at them closely, then said, “You may enter. Except her.” He pointed at Serì.

“And who are you to decide that?” Donna asked. Her tone betrayed her frustration with the whole situation.

“I’m the local evacuation officer. I’m responsible for the people in this district getting to safety in case of…,” he boomed, but Donna interrupted him before he could finish his sentence.

“Then I’d suggest you reconsider your decision, or you won’t be the local evacuation officer much longer.”

Jack grinned inwardly. He could see why the Doctor had chosen Donna as a companion. She was stubborn, had an uncanny sense for what was right, and was not afraid to call even the Doctor on his behaviour. A bureaucrat on a backwater planet would never stand a chance.

The evacuation officer looked at Jack, apparently hoping for help. “But we can’t let them all in. We don’t have the capacity.”

Even if it was true, that still wasn’t a reason to stop letting people into the bunker while there still was space left. One look at Donna told Jack, that she was thinking the same, and about to make known her opinion with a tirade, possibly followed by slapping the bureaucrat into another dimension. He gave the official a hard look. “Mate, you’ve got no idea what you brought upon you with that sentence. So, to stop my sister here from exploding into your face, I suggest you answer us a few questions. One: How long until the storm hits?”

The other man consulted his data pad. “Two and a half standard hours.”

“And how long is it going to last?”

“They’re estimating six hours, seven at the most.”

“Let’s say you close off the bunker in one and a half hours and keep it locked an additional two hours after the storm is supposed to die down, that would mean we’d need air for nine hours. Now, how many people can you let in and still have enough air for that long?”

A quick calculation on the data pad was followed by, “Six thousand.”

“And how many are in here?”

“Four thousand three hundred and eighty-six,” the evacuation officer told him after another glance at his data pad.

“Then I suggest you let everyone in, until you’ve reached six thousand,” Donna threw in, with an expression that could have scared a statue to death.

The man in front of her paled considerably.

~o~o~o~

“Do you want to go back to the TARDIS, Donna?” Jack asked, after they had spent more than an
hour helping organise the people already in the bunker, making room for more refugees. “She’d probably be safer than this bunker.”

Donna shook her head. “They won’t say it, but they need every hand they can get. One of the other evacuation officials told me that most of their volunteers left the city when the meteorological service gave out their first warning. Besides, if we leave the guy at the entrance might return to his ‘you’re only getting in here if I like your nose’ attitude.”

Jack grinned at that. “Valid argument.”

For the next few hours they helped the evacuation staff keeping up some semblance of order. Donna was about to hand a child back to her mother when the buzz of voices around her was interrupted by a loud, rumbling noise. The bulkhead was closing, shutting them off from the outside.

She looked up to meet Jack’s eyes. Now they were stuck.
Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Summary

The storm hits...

Roughly three hours after the door to his cell had closed behind the Doctor it opened again. At least he thought that it was three hours. On every other planet he would have been able to narrow it down to the nanosecond, but here all he could do was make a guess. This planet had confused his time sense thoroughly, and being stuck in a windowless cell didn’t exactly help the situation. On top of that, his headache had gotten worse as well.

He turned his attention to the people who had entered his cell, two guards and a man in a white lab coat. He groaned inwardly and hoped that he hadn’t accidently run into the cliché evil scientist trying to take over the world. Again.

But instead of boring him to death with the sort of monologue that had become pretty much standard in that kind of situation, the man in the lab coat got to the point immediately.

“I am Doctor Gombar, the leader of the Meteorological Service and as such I am obliged to interrogate you within the first four hours of your arrest. Since we are expecting a huge storm to hit, I won’t have time for this during the next few hours, so let’s get it over with.” He looked around in the cell, noting the lack of another sitting accommodation beyond the bed and decided, “Let’s move this to conference room three.”

He took a step back, indicating for the Doctor to follow him.

The Doctor made no move to get up, so the scientist gestured at the guards. “I can have them drag you there, or you can come along willingly. I’d prefer you’d come, but I can live with whatever you decide.”

Groaning inwardly at the headache that decided to get worse upon movement, the Doctor followed the scientist out of his cell, curious where this would lead. He still wanted answers to his questions, and he had the feeling that the scientist was the person who could give them. The guards fell into place slightly behind, but made no move to restrain him.

They never made it to the conference room. On their way through the building, the small group came across a large control room, with windows to the corridor that provided an excellent view of what was going on inside. The Doctor turned his head, saw what was displayed on the main screen on the opposite wall and stopped dead in his tracks. The guards ran into him, but he didn’t care. He just stood there, in the middle of the corridor, oblivious to his surroundings, his attention captured entirely by the data on the screen. He hadn’t seen figures like these for years, and truth be told, he wouldn’t have minded to never see them again.

“This is no ordinary storm you’re expecting,” he stated, staring at the display.

“No. It’s a…”

“Time Storm,” he finished the sentence.
“How do you know that?”

“How do you know that?” Heedless of the guards that eyed him warily, he opened the door next to the row of windows and walked into the room. He stopped right in front of the large screen and took in the display, trying to figure out the meaning of the different readings.

He rubbed his forehead in a predictably futile attempt to ease his headache, then turned his attention back to the main screen. Finally the meaning of the figures on the monitor sank in, and a wave of sheer horror swept over him. Not even during the Time War, when they had used Time Storms as a means of last resort, had he ever seen a storm of this strength, and by the looks of it Donna and Jack would be right in the middle of things. Unless they made it back to the TARDIS in time the storm would kill them, and even in the TARDIS their chances of survival were slim. Even a dimensionally transcendent time ship would suffer from a Time Storm, despite the shielding he had reinforced after Skaro.

This was his fault. He had practically abducted them and brought them here. And now they’d probably die because of him.

He whirled around and turned to the scientist, not caring that his voice might betray his fear. “A Time Storm of this scale will destroy more than just your capital. You can count yourself lucky if it doesn’t rip your planet apart.”

“I know,” the man said calmly. “But there isn’t anything we can do. All we could do was warn the civilians, evacuate the city and get as many people as possible into the bunkers. That’s what we always do.”

The Doctor closed his eyes as he realised something. “That’s what happened to the industrial complex where your people arrested me.” He rubbed his forehead again. The headache really wasn’t helping. It was already beginning to slow down his thought process and he had a dim feeling that it was only going to get worse.

Doctor Gombar nodded. “It was hit by a small storm only a few months ago, even if it looks as if it has been abandoned for decades. The storm hit with almost no forewarning. Fortunately we got all the workers out in time.”

“They’re getting stronger.” It wasn’t a question.

“They have been for some time.” The scientist snorted. “We are called the Meteorological Service, but weather forecasts were never our main purpose. Once upon a time our people used to hop back and forth through the dimensions…”

“How?” the Doctor interrupted, curious where this would lead.

“The reality converter,” Doctor Gombar said. “People would spend their mornings at home, pop over to Parallel/Alpha49 for lunch, go shopping on Parallel/Rho27 and listen to a concert on Parallel/Gamma68 in the evening. Whenever someone wanted to cross into another dimension, he would use the reality converter, capture the force of a Time Storm and create a portal. At least that’s the story they told us. By the time we signed up with this agency, that wasn’t true anymore, because it had already become dangerous.”

“What changed?”

“We don’t know. The Meteorological Service noticed the Time Storms getting stronger. Safely holding up a portal long enough for someone to pass through became almost impossible. The reality
converter couldn’t hold the force of the storms in check, and the power they exuded began to rip apart the fabric of time and space. To save the planet, the Meteorological Service declared crossing into other dimensions illegal, banned the technology, and after a few decades the knowledge that we had ever been able to travel to other dimensions began to fade. Now we try to keep it that way, and we monitor our networks to suppress every idea going in that direction. But that didn’t stop the Time Storms. They are still building, and we don’t know how to stop them.”

Gombar sighed. “We figured out early on that the storms only affect people when they are out in the open, unprotected. So we issue storm warnings whenever a Time Storm is going to hit. Unfortunately there are no caves or tunnels in this area, and we can’t build any because the ground is nearly impenetrable here. So we began to build bunkers on the surface, but there are not nearly enough of them. We tell the general public that the bunkers provide protection, but in the end they are nothing more than reinforced steel under a massive layer of concrete. Expose them to a Time Storm long enough, and they will crumble under the sheer force of Time.”

And kill the people who had sought shelter inside, the Doctor thought. Then he paused. Something about what Gombar had said was important, more important than information about the bunkers, or the Xerian Meteorological Service trying to control people’s knowledge. Then realisation hit. Fabric of time, Gombar had said. As it had before, with the misplaced trader in medieval London, it all came down to the shock waves.

“Oh yes, that’s it!” He grinned manically. “The Time Storms got stronger at the time the full force of the shock waves hit Xeriax. Until then you had only experienced smaller disturbances, and apparently discovered the occasional piece of flotsam you weren’t supposed to have, like the technology for your reality converters.”

“What are you talking about?” the scientist asked, apparently confused by the Doctor’s sudden change of demeanour. “What shock wave?”

“Not only the reality converters, your entire equipment is based on technology that was invented by my people,” the Doctor said, carefully avoiding the term ‘Time Lord’. “There was a war, and we lost. And the cataclysm that ended it sent shock waves through the entire universe, carrying along debris from the war like flotsam, including some of the dimension-crossing equipment your people used. Eventually the equipment stranded on Xeriax, you found out what it could do and pressed the proverbial red button.”

“What red button?”

“What are you, a parrot?” the Doctor asked impatiently, still not entirely certain where his reasoning would lead. Everything came down to the end of the Time War and the cracks in reality. Without them, none of this would have happened. Not the Xerians crossing dimensions, not the Cybermen, not Canary Wharf, not Rose being imprisoned in another universe — and ultimately all of this was his fault. “As a result of the war, or rather its end, there are tiny fractures in the fabric of reality, which enabled you to travel between dimensions using the alien technology that washed up here on the shock waves. Without those cracks you’d have been like a prisoner trying to break out of his cell by throwing cotton pads at the wall. If you had left the fissures alone, they would have healed eventually, like they did on other planets that were hit by the shock waves. But whenever you used the reality converters to cross into another dimension, you widened them, bit by bit, until they merged into a gaping wound in the fabric of reality.

“The first fissures into the Void between dimensions were the reason the first storm built. And when you started to gather their force to visit parallel worlds, this opened even more cracks, which fuelled the storms. And every storm ripped the fabric of reality further apart.”
The Doctor paused and waited for the moment when realisation would hit. He didn’t have to wait for long.

“This is our fault,” Doctor Gombar said. “We set all of this in motion, and now it is going to destroy us, our people, our entire planet.”

The Doctor was silent. Ultimately, it was he who stood at the beginning of this chain reaction, but he had never imagined that something remotely like this would happen.

“Is there something we can do to stop this?” the scientist asked.

Unfortunately the figures on the monitor told the Doctor that they had no such luck. “At this point, the system is self-sustaining.” And eventually it would be self-destructing, but from the look at Gombar’s face the scientist knew what he was not saying. “But there is something I can do.”

“You? Why you?”

“Because I’m the only one who can.”

~o~o~o~

The Doctor stood like a statue in the middle of a large plaza, waiting for the Time Storm to hit. In one of the corners of the square the Meteorological Service had built a small automated surveillance post, but otherwise the plaza was completely empty. He didn’t need help anyway. He was the only person on the entire planet who might have an infinitesimal chance of stopping this storm, and every form of so-called assistance would have been nothing more than a distraction. The plaza around him was more or less optional, too. He could have done this basically anywhere, but open space made it easier. Less distractions and less collateral damage. If he survived this, that was. Otherwise collateral damage wouldn’t matter anyway.

He would never admit it to anyone, but he was scared to death. He hadn’t attempted anything remotely like this since the Time War, and even then he wouldn’t even have considered doing it without at least three or four Time Lords to anchor him. He had conjured up a Time Storm on his own during one of the last battles before the end, true, but at the time he had been beyond caring what would happen to him and everyone else who got caught up in it, because slim as it was, it had been the only chance left to change the outcome of the battle. He had known that he was grasping at straws, already knowing what he would have to do to end the war, but he had had to try every other possible solution first. And had failed.

This time, failing would mean condemning Jack, Donna and everyone else in this city, because the bunkers wouldn’t be able to withstand a storm of this strength. And losing Jack and Donna just wasn’t going to happen. Not when he was the reason that they were here in the first place. He would contain this Time Storm and while he was at it, repair the fissures in the fabric of reality, or else one day the planet would be ripped apart. Maybe not this time, maybe not the next, but if the Time Storms didn’t cease it would happen eventually. So he had to do something about it, even if it wasn’t going to be easy.

Which might have been the understatement of the century, he added mentally. Compared to what he was about to do, bringing himself in tune with the ventilator on Platform One had been children’s play. He had told Jack that he could control Time to a certain extent, but trying to contain a Time Storm was much more difficult, especially without anyone who could anchor him and without being able to feel Time like he should. If he wasn’t careful, if he made a wrong decision, not only would this planet die, he would most likely condemn the entire star system.
“No time like the present,” he said to no one in particular, then he took a deep breath and closed his eyes. He concentrated on the feel of the air around him and on what he should be feeling: the planet turning under his feet, falling through space, hurtling around its star, the star system moving through its galaxy, the universe expanding.

For a seemingly endless moment there was absolutely nothing, but suddenly he felt as if he had broken through a glass barrier. Time was back, and once again he could see timelines swirling around him. He searched them carefully, and eventually found the dark, tangled mass that represented the Time Storm.

Tentatively he reached out and touched a timeline with his mind, but as soon as he made contact he knew he had made a mistake. The Storm was a lot stronger than he had thought, and way too powerful to be controlled by him alone.

He began fighting it nonetheless, knowing what was at stake. He tried to draw the force of the storm upon itself, folding the mass of timelines, and for a few moments he thought that he was gaining on the storm. But the Time Storm was beginning to draw him in, an irresistible force threatening to crush him. Before he even realised what was happening, he was in far too deep, the maelstrom of time pulling him in. And it was already too late to draw back. This would be the end.

For a moment his thoughts began to wander, but with an enormous effort of will he forced every unrelated thought to the back of his mind, in a desperate attempt to regain control over the storm. But still the force of Time was tugging on him, distracting him, trying to shake him off, and he knew that he wouldn’t be able to hold it back for much longer, much less contain it.

For a nanosecond he asked himself what would happen if he gave up, but he dismissed the thought immediately. What was threatening this planet was ultimately his fault, and he would do everything in his power to stop it, even if it was the last thing he ever did.

Suddenly he became aware of an almost imperceptible attempt at telepathic contact, and he reached out for the thin mental tendrils. Grasping one of them like a lifeline, he felt every sensation heighten. The TARDIS was lending him power, guiding him, anchoring him.

He didn’t dare to divide his attention to tell how long he fought the storm. Slowly he gained on it, until he felt it begin to die down. Then one of the buildings on his left began to crumble, no longer able to withstand the force of Time. Windows shattered, and a shower of debris hit him. Brief as it was, it was enough to break his concentration.

Then a time eddy struck him, and he lost all the progress he had already made. Once again the storm began to draw him in. He clung to his connection to the TARDIS, but this time even the additional power of the time ship seemed to be not enough to save him.

He felt his anguish being echoed by the TARDIS, followed by a cry for help that reverberated throughout reality, then the maelstrom of time began to swallow him.

Rose...

~0~0~0~

Rose...

Rose Tyler looked up from the schematics she had been studying, almost certain that she had heard something, when suddenly a feeling of distress washed over her and she gasped.

Jake, who had been occupying one of the four other desks in the room, turned his attention to her.
“Rose? Something wrong?”

She gulped, gripping the table to keep her hands from shaking, but shook her head. “I’m fine.”

Jake raised his eyebrows. “You’re white as a sheet.”

“I’m fine,” Rose repeated, not entirely sure that she convinced him, and not really caring, because at this moment another wave of distress hit her.

“No, you’re not.” Jake got up from his chair and came over to her desk. “What’s wrong?”

“I dunno. Maybe I’ve eaten something wrong,” she said, knowing that that was not the case.

“Rose, the food in the cafeteria is bad, but not that bad. I know an old ready room on sublevel B that hasn’t been in use since the war against the Cybers. You can collapse on one of the beds, and then you can tell me what exactly is going on here.”

Rose opened her mouth to tell him that his concern was unnecessary but shut it again and nodded instead. She really wasn’t feeling all that well. Fortunately they had been alone in the room, because she wasn’t sure how she would have reacted to anyone but Jake or Mickey seeing her like that.

They had barely reached Jake’s secret ready room, when a third wave of distress shook her, stronger this time, and she suddenly felt as if an incoming tide was trying to draw her under. She sat down on one of the beds, gasping for air, but the feeling didn’t subside.

Rose shook her head in an attempt to shake off the sensation and tried to concentrate. Something was very familiar about the emotion she was receiving, even though she couldn’t quite place it. But she was fairly certain that whatever was going on here was somehow related to her past. During their first meeting between dimensions the Doctor had said that she might be telepathic now, and what she was experiencing felt a bit like when the TARDIS had tried to communicate with her after the Gamestation. Just the feeling of distress was new.

Eventually the wave receded, and she became aware of someone calling her name.

“Rose?” Jake asked, sounding clearly worried.

She looked up. “I think something is wrong. With the Doctor or the TARDIS, or maybe both of them.” She had barely finished her sentence when another wave of distress hit her.

“How do you know that?”

Rose ignored him, because once more the feeling of being drawn underwater tried to overwhelm her. But this time she was prepared and slowly she began to follow the feeling of distress back to its source, shutting everything else out. She acted by pure instinct, descending deeper and deeper into her mind, until she reached a small golden knot. For an indeterminable amount of time she simply regarded it, then reached out and touched it. And remembered.

I looked into the TARDIS and the TARDIS looked into me.

She had forged a bond with the TARDIS, and now something was wrong with the ship. The TARDIS was screaming across the Void, begging for help.

~o~o~o~

The Doctor felt himself being torn apart by the storm, bit by bit, fibre by fibre. He tried to fight it, but
he was not strong enough. This was his fault, all of this. Nothing would have happened if he hadn’t used the Moment. This was his punishment, and it was only fair that his life ended like this. It should have ended long ago. The only thing that he regretted was that he couldn’t save the people on this planet, and that Donna and Jack would have to die because of him. And Rose…

Ever since Krop Tor, when he had finally acted on his feelings, against his better judgement, he had felt that he was living on borrowed time. He had had another chance to end it on Darlig Ulv Stranden, and he had used it to tie her even more tightly to him. Now fate had finally found him, and he didn’t even get the chance to say goodbye. She would never know what had happened to him.

His thoughts were interrupted when he suddenly perceived a light in the middle of the Storm, unfazed by the chaos surrounding it. Slowly but steadily it came nearer, and eventually it engulfed him completely, even if it didn’t touch him.

For some time he just stared at the phenomenon in wonder, then reached out with his mind and touched it.

_I want you safe. My Doctor…_

“Rose?” he asked disbelievingly. Somehow she had known that something was wrong, and now she was trying to save him. Even if that might mean her end.

What he felt from the entity surrounding him was neither confirmation nor denial.

_I take the words. I scatter them…_

“Bad Wolf…” the Doctor muttered in astonishment.

The light around him brightened, warmth surrounded him, and he could almost imagine Rose standing next to him, her tongue poking through her teeth as she smiled at him and reached for his hand.

...to lead myself here.

For the first time in what seemed more than the few hours since he had set foot on Xeriax his head was clear, the headache gone. And finally he understood.

Even before his concentration had been broken, the TARDIS had realised that she alone was not strong enough to anchor him. She had done what she normally only did when they were safely in the Vortex and he was asleep: She had bridged the Void and established a connection with Rose. Only this time she had called Bad Wolf.

“What have you done?” he asked his ship angrily. “Do you have any idea how dangerous…”

The TARDIS sent him the mental equivalent of an electric shock before he had even finished his sentence, followed by the image of a woman with crossed arms and raised eyebrows that looked a lot like Jackie Tyler. Too much for his liking, if he was honest.

If the Doctor could have glared at the ship, he would have. As things were, he sent her the telepathic equivalent of a stern look. “This could kill Rose, and you know that. I bet she wasn’t even asleep when you made contact…”

The golden glowing entity surrounding him effectively ended the telepathic argument between him and his ship with a flash.
I made my choice a long time ago.

He was about to open his mouth to tell her that he was not worth risking her life, something she would most likely not have accepted as a valid argument anyway, when the TARDIS sent him an image of a clock ticking down to zero.

The TARDIS was right. Time was running out. The Time Storm had almost reached the city, and when it hit, it would only take a short length of time to destroy not only the regular buildings, but also the bunkers in which people had sought shelter.

Again he got the feeling that Rose was reaching for his hand, like she always did before they ran — into danger or away from it. It didn’t really matter, but then it never had. All that mattered was her being with him. He smiled briefly and reached out for her, suddenly feeling her warmth permeating him. Then he began to concentrate on the task at hand again.

In the beginning he made very little progress, and he was farther from stemming this Time Storm than he had been when he had begun to fight it for the first time, but at least he was able to push it back far enough that the maelstrom stopped pulling on him. Now he could concentrate on containing the storm once again.

It was only after a few minutes that he realised that fighting the storm had somehow become easier than it had been before. He could anticipate time eddies earlier than he had been able before, which allowed him to either avoid or counteract them, and soon he had reached the point when the time eddy had hit him the first time, when the storm had already been dying down.

*Better with two.*

If the golden entity surrounding him had been able to grin at him, he was certain she would have done it. Because she was right.

Together they could do almost anything, and with the Bad Wolf and the TARDIS anchoring him, he could use all his strength to fight the storm, instead of having to split his concentration to keep anchored to the TARDIS.

With renewed effort he began to contain the Time Storm, drawing it on itself until it slowly began to collapse, a process that could best be compared to the formation of a black hole. When the process finally came to a hold, the Doctor held a compact mass of tangled timelines, held together by sheer force of will. Now all that was left was to get rid of it.

For a second he divided his attention between the Time Storm and the Void between dimensions, searching for a fissure, only to realise that Bad Wolf had foreseen his intention. She already had created a stable pathway into the Void, using one of the fractures in the fabric of reality that the storm had created.

The Doctor took the tangled mass that represented the Time Storm and *pushed*. Mentally he guided the remnants of the storm through the pathway, then he began to close the passage. The golden entity representing the Bad Wolf shot towards the Void, and for a second he feared that she would be drawn into it, like Rose would have been in Torchwood Tower if Pete hadn’t shown up and saved her.

She didn’t. Bad Wolf simply *touched* the Void, and the tear began to heal, much faster than it would have if he had closed it on his own. The scar glowed for a moment, then it vanished.

Then Bad Wolf returned to him, and together they began to repair the damage to the fabric of reality
the Time Storms had done during the last decades, closing the tears one by one. He would concentrate on a fissure, start the task of closing it and then Bad Wolf would accelerate the process.

Eventually they had healed all of the large fissures, leaving only the very small ones, which weren’t nearly big enough to fuel another Time Storm and would eventually heal on their own. For a moment Bad Wolf returned to him, and warmth suffused the Doctor. He felt the mental equivalent of a hug, followed by a goodbye, then the entity vanished as fast as it had come.

He released a breath he hadn’t even realised he’d been holding, and slowly opened his eyes again. The buildings around him had crumbled to dust, the second row of buildings looked as if they were centuries old, but beneath that the city seemed to be untouched. Even though the Time Storm could have destroyed the entire city, it had hit mainly this part and spared other areas. So far, his plan had worked.

As soon as he saw the scientists from the Meteorological Service entering the plaza, he decided that now would be the time to vanish from the scene, especially since the dust in the air would cover his disappearance. It was time to set the second part of his plan into motion.

~o~o~o~

When Rose came back to her senses, Jake’s worried face was looming over her. She squinted against the light, the bright lamps in the ready room not doing anything for the murder headache that had settled in her head.

“Rose?”

“Give me a mo’,” she croaked, trying to sit up.

“Whoa, slowly!” Jake helped her up and steadied her.

“How long was I out?”

“Three hours. What happened?”

“I don’t know.” Seeing Jake’s sceptical look, she amended, “Well, I’ve got an idea, but I’m not really sure. Ever since the Gamestation I’ve had a connection with the TARDIS, and I could feel she needed my help. I think… I became Bad Wolf again.”

“But didn’t you say that it had almost killed you?”

“The TARDIS would never do anything that could harm me,” she said with conviction.

“But…”

“Jake, please… Just trust me.” She slowly stood up, her legs still a bit shaky, but keeping her upright. “But please do me a favour: Don’t tell anyone.”

Jake grinned in understanding. “Yeah, I could do without your mum yelling at me because I didn’t stop you.”

Rose grinned back. “See?”
Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Summary

Lots of arguing, followed by a bit of breaking and entering...

At the sound of the TARDIS doors opening, the Doctor looked up from the screen he had been staring at.

“I need your vortex manipulator, Jack,” he said with a brief glance in the direction of one of the two people that had just entered the ship, then went back to typing.

Jack raised an eyebrow. For some reason, something about the Doctor’s demand annoyed him. Apparently the Doctor had known that the TARDIS had repaired his vortex manipulator, but that only was to be expected. After all, the TARDIS was his ship. No, what really irritated him was what the Doctor hadn’t said.

“‘Hello Jack, hello Donna. Nice to see you. I’m glad you survived the storm. Are you all right?’” he said, adopting a fake Northern accent that was dripping with exaggerated concern. He briefly shook his head and continued, this time sounding more like himself again, but unable to completely suppress his anger, “Honestly, Doc, some basic communication skills would do you a world of good. No wonder it took you an eternity to admit your feelings to Rose.”

The Doctor finally turned around and glared at him. “You done?”

For Jack, the Doctor’s demeanour only served to add fuel to the fire. “Actually, no. You leave me on a space station full of Dalek dust two hundred thousand years in the future because you can’t stand to look at me. You leave Donna for a week in a slave camp on Skaro, and afterwards you don’t even ask how she is. And now you basically kidnap us and strand us on a planet without as much as a trace of the Time Vortex, in a city about to be hit by a storm that could have destroyed it, where we have to stop a couple of bureaucratic evac officers from deciding who lives or dies based on how they like people’s noses while you run off in a fit, and you don’t even care how we are, just that I still have my vortex manipulator, because you need it. With friends like you, why would I need enemies?”

Jack fell silent as he realised only now that he still was angry at the Doctor for leaving him behind on Satellite 5. He had told himself, that it didn’t matter, that the Doctor had, well, almost apologised to him, but that wasn’t true. The betrayal he felt ran deeper than that. He had considered the Doctor a friend, and friends simply didn’t leave each other behind on a space station full of dust and the bodies of people who had died to buy him time.

And this time, it had felt the same. The Doctor had simply stormed off and left them. Even if Jack rationally knew that the Doctor had probably been overreacting to the absence of timelines on this planet, it had felt like being abandoned again.

The Doctor took a breath and seemed to be counting to ten, or maybe ten thousand, to stop himself from shouting at him, even if Jack would probably have felt better if he had.

“Would you please lend me your vortex manipulator, Jack?” the Doctor asked, a slightly scathing
undertone in his voice.

The Doctor’s questions only served to raise his hackles. “And for what exactly would you need my vortex manipulator? I remember clearly that you told me only a stupid ape would ever use one of them to travel through time and space.” Despite his attempts at keeping his voice even, Jack knew he had failed when he saw Donna wince.

“Because I can’t take the TARDIS into the headquarters of the Meteorological Service to get the equipment I need to get Rose back.” The Doctor was getting louder as well.

“Rose, yes. That’s a good point, Doc,” Jack bit out, completely ignoring the rest of what the Doctor had said. “Of course you’d do everything for her, which apparently doesn’t apply to Donna and me. But tell me one thing: Why the heck didn’t you think to secure her to that stupid magnaclamp? Or to the lever, for that matter. Nothing would have happened if you had thought of that.”

The Doctor sent him a glare of such absolute fury that Jack wondered briefly why he hadn’t dropped dead on the grating. “Don’t you think I haven’t asked myself that ever since? But we wouldn’t have been there in the first place, if your employer hadn’t thought it a good idea to play with the Void.”

“I didn’t have anything to do with that, and you know it. I’m not stupid!”

“Could have fooled me!”

“Oi!” Donna shouted, effectively interrupting the argument. “If the two of you want to behave like three-year-olds with a temper tantrum, I’m sure the TARDIS will find you a nice room where you can throw handfuls of sand at each other.”

“No, she won’t, because she is too exhausted to even bring us into the Time Vortex at the moment, let alone the headquarters of the Meteorological Service,” the Doctor snapped.

“Oh, what did she have to do? Shock some sense into you?” Jack asked scathingly.

“No, she had to anchor me while I was busy saving every sorry ass on this godforsaken planet from a Time Storm,” the Doctor gave back heatedly. “None of us would even be here if she hadn’t established a connection with Rose to bring Bad Wolf into this universe.”

The TARDIS had brought back Bad Wolf? Jack was confused. Did that mean…

“What is a Time Storm? And what do you mean, a connection with Rose?” Donna interrupted Jack’s thoughts, looking about as confused as Jack felt. “Does that mean you can get her back?”

“No, Donna, that does not mean I can get her back. That means that she could have died helping me, and at the moment I can’t even find out if she is still alive, because as I said, the TARDIS is exhausted.”

Donna looked as if she was going to strangle him. “Well, since we are apparently not going anywhere at the moment, I suggest you explain to us why exactly we are not going anywhere at the moment,” she snapped.

The Doctor raised his eyes to the ceiling and took a deep breath, apparently clinging to the last shreds of his self-control. Then he bit out, “We are not going anywhere, Donna, because a few idiots on this planet used the power of Time Storms to cross into other universes, and by doing so they almost ripped apart the fabric of reality. The storm warning you got was no ordinary storm, and it had to be stopped, because otherwise it could have ripped the planet apart. And I wouldn’t have been able to do that without the TARDIS and Rose as the Bad Wolf anchoring me.”
“I still don’t understand, Doc. Does that mean, Rose was back in this universe, but is gone again? If she was already here, couldn’t you pull her over completely?” Jack asked, trying to remember what exactly the Doctor had told him about that meeting between dimensions thing.

The Doctor shook his head, suddenly looking completely worn out. “It doesn’t work like that. Our minds can meet between dimensions, but that doesn’t mean that Rose can physically cross the Void. Not without some sort of equipment that could open a passage without harming the integrity of space and time in the process.

“Bad Wolf was only here because the TARDIS and I had been in distress, and the TARDIS decided that bridging the Void and bringing Bad Wolf here was our only chance of survival. But maintaining the connection through the Time Storm cost the TARDIS plenty, which means that until she’s healed I can’t find out if Rose is alright. I don’t even want to imagine what this might have done to her.”

“I still don’t understand,” Jack said. “Why should it hurt Rose? How this is different from what you’ve already been doing?”

“Because,” the Doctor gave back in a tone that clearly indicated that he would have had to bite back a few insults if he hadn’t been too exhausted to even think them up, “connecting properly bonded minds that are in the same universe and asleep is easy. But we are in different universes and the bond between us is still developing. Connecting our sleeping minds, even if we are in different universes, works only because both of us share a connection with the TARDIS, even if it is exhausting for my ship. But things get more difficult if we are awake. Connecting us while awake and in the same universe would probably render one or both participants unconscious, connecting us while at least one of us is awake and in another universe might kill the weaker telepath. It’s not like using a phone, you know.”

Not like phoning someone, indeed, Jack thought, suddenly worried. He just hoped that Rose was alright. If something had happened to her while she had tried to save the Doctor... He didn't even want to finish the thought. Then his thoughts returned to the Time Storm. He’d heard legends about them during his time in the Time Agency, but as with Time Lords he had thought they were exactly that: legends. According to the stories he’d heard, the strongest Time Storms could rip planets apart, and even those who considered themselves the Lords of Time would rather let a Time Storm run its course than face one and try to contain it.

And the Doctor had fought it alone. He had to be exhausted from what must have been an almost impossible task, and now he couldn’t even convince himself that Rose was alright. Add to that that his beloved ship had suffered as well, and Jack knew why the Doctor was on edge.

“So what are you planning?” he asked, the anger suddenly gone. One day the Doctor and him might still have words, but not today. Today there were more important things at stake.

“According to what I found out, the Xerian Meteorological Service still has their dimension crossing equipment, disabled, but most likely still functional,” the Doctor said. “I’m gonna take it.”

Jack nodded. “Two birds with one stone. Clean up this mess and prevent a repetition, and maybe get the means to get Rose back.”

Donna grinned. “I bloody well hope so. More of your moping, Doctor, and I might not be responsible for my actions.”

“Oi! Time Lords don’t mope!”

Jack grinned. “For someone who doesn’t mope you are not half bad at it.”
Even the TARDIS threw in an amused, if weak, hum.

The Doctor rolled his eyes. “Fantastic. My ship and my companions ganging up on me.”

“So, what’s the plan?” Donna asked.

“As I said before, I need Jack’s vortex manipulator. I make a jump, retrieve the equipment, and off we go!”

“Not gonna happen,” Jack said.

“Fine. We can go over all of that again, and then I’m probably gonna lose my patience and…”

Jack shook his head. “You’re not going into this on your own. You need backup.”

“And who says you can carry your dimension-crossing machine on your own?” Donna added, crossing her arms to make her intention at joining them clear and apparently ignoring the existence of the anti-grav unit in Storage Seven.

The Doctor sighed. “Is there anything I can do to convince you to stay here?”

“Nope,” Donna and Jack said simultaneously.

“Right. Here’s the plan…”

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She was okay. She had to be.

After what had happened on the plaza, the Doctor had tried to keep himself together, to concentrate on the next part of his plan, despite what joining with the TARDIS to rescue him might have meant for Rose.

But Jack Harkness had wanted reasons he wasn’t willing to give, because that would mean having to voice his worries, and then Jack had picked the one point that would shatter his façade, and he had snapped.

She was okay. She had to be.

Without the TARDIS being fully functional, their only means to travel in time or space was Jack’s vortex manipulator. Even if time travel was completely out of the question on a planet that had been hit by hundreds of Time Storms during the last decades and barely survived them, they could still use the vortex manipulator to get into the Meteorological Service. But they were running out of time.

Soon the entire Meteorological Service would be alerted to his disappearance, if it hadn’t already happened. And that would mean that they would increase the number of guards inside their headquarters, since he hadn’t exactly been discreet when hacking them for the first time. Only an idiot wouldn’t realise that he would try to steal the dimension-crossing equipment.

And Jack and Donna had decided to waste precious minutes by arguing with him.

She was okay. She had to be.

He clung to the mantra that kept repeating itself in his head. It had to be true, because if it wasn’t… He didn’t finish the thought, not willing to face even the possibility, and pressed the button on Jack’s vortex manipulator.
The three time travellers materialised in a corridor that looked vaguely familiar to the Doctor. For a second he recalled the building plans he had hacked into earlier.

“That way.” He pointed to the left.

“As soon as I’m no longer in danger of eating backwards,” Donna said, holding herself upright by leaning against the wall. “Compared to this, the TARDIS’s bumpy landings are actually smooth…”

“Oi! No insulting my ship!” the Doctor complained. “But you’re right. Why take a scooter when you have a sports car?”

Jack raised an eyebrow. “For someone who desperately needed my vortex manipulator you’re in severe danger of never using it again.”

Eventually Donna had recovered enough to stand without needing support, even if she was still a bit pale. Not one to be stopped by something as trivial as a bit of nausea, she made her way to the next corner, but the Doctor snatched her arm just before she could turn around.

“Careful,” he hissed as loudly as he dared. “Even if we know where the ready rooms of the guards are, we’ve got no idea if they’re going on rounds. Besides, everyone working with the Meteorological Service is likely to gather at the headquarters to find out why exactly the Storm died down before it could fully hit the city.”

There had been a reason why he had wanted to go on his own. Or better, a couple of them. What he hadn’t said was that the Meteorological Service was most likely still looking for him. No government organisation he had ever encountered appreciated it if their prisoners suddenly vanished, having helped to avoid the impending apocalypse or not. Said government organisations also tended to being extremely curious as to why or how their prisoner had been able to do what he had done. Which with surprising regularity led to threats of dissecting him or killing his companions.

“Then why did you land us in the middle of a corridor if it is so dangerous?” Donna asked. “What about a supply closet?”

“Because a vortex manipulator is not exactly a reliable travelling device. I’m surprised we’ve hit the right part of the building.” Otherwise they’d have had a problem because the building was a bloody maze with the main control room at the centre. If they had landed anywhere else, they’d have had to cross one of the corridors adjacent to the control room, and in that case avoiding the Meteorological Service wouldn’t have been easy.

They carefully checked every corridor before they entered it, and eventually they were only one corridor away from their destination. Of course at that point they ran out of luck.

Jack was just approaching the corner, when two scientists turned around it and ran directly into the group of intruders.

The Doctor opened his mouth in an attempt to bluff their way into the storage area, but he had only gotten as far as ‘hello’, accompanied by a friendly wave, when one of the scientists shouted, “Intruders!”

The humanoid in the white lab coat turned around and broke into a run, dragging his colleague with him, shouting for help.

The Doctor didn’t waste time. He nodded at Jack, jerking his chin to indicate that Jack should take the left one, and they lunged at the two scientists. Jack hit his target at the temple, caught his body and lowered him to the floor, while the Doctor used something that resembled a Vulcan nerve pinch.
The result was the same.

“Sorry about the headache, mate,” Jack said to the unconscious form of the scientist he had just knocked out. “Wrong place, wrong time.”

“We can’t just let them lie around in the corridor,” the Doctor said after a short pause. “They’ll inform security as soon as they’re conscious again.”

Donna grinned. “The door over there looks like a broom closet, don’t you think?”

Jack laughed. “Oh, I knew I would like you!”

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The storage area looked like storage areas all over the universe look. There were minimal differences, depending on the technological standard of the relevant society, of course, but all in all, they looked the same. This one was no different, just another high-rise storage that could have been anywhere in the universe.

The storage area consisted of three parts, each with a separately controlled storage system. Unfortunately, the information the Doctor had retrieved from the network didn’t tell him in which part the equipment was stored, so they lost almost five minutes looking for the right one. As the Doctor could have predicted, it was the last terminal he checked. Thankfully, the storage system was automated. A few minutes later, dozens of boxes with equipment piled in front of them, and Jack and Donna began to secure the first batch on the antigrav unit they had brought.

The Doctor had just entered the last item number of the dimension crossing equipment to take it out of store, and the system had already begun to move, when he heard something outside. The guards must have found the scientists. And apparently now they had found them. It was only a matter of minutes until the guards would break the locks they’d jammed as soon as they’d entered the storage area.

“Jack, you take the first half of the equipment and Donna back to the TARDIS,” he said, keeping his voice even.

“Why?” Donna protested, predictably, while Jack grabbed the antigrav unit with the hand to which his vortex manipulator was attached and pulled it nearer.

“Because they have found the scientists. It won’t take them long to realise they have intruders, and given the fact that they arrested me for using a bloody search engine to get information about crossing dimensions, they’ll soon figure out what we’re after.”

“But why do I have to go?”

“Because according to the storage system, the equipment we are after weighs almost two tons,” the Doctor explained, a slight strain in his voice. “There’s no way Jack’s vortex manipulator will be able to carry all of it and us in one go, not even with the antigrav unit we brought.”

“Are you saying you think I’m fat?” Donna screeched, and the Doctor could see a slap looming in his near future if he didn’t defuse the bomb that was Donna Noble quickly.

“No, Donna, I’m saying I didn’t know how much equipment would be there, because that information was stored in a part of the network I couldn’t hack without raising an alarm. Besides, three bio signatures are a lot to store for a simple vortex manipulator.”
“And why exactly didn’t you tell us that before we got here?”

The Doctor sighed. “I wanted you to stay in the TARDIS in the first place, didn’t I?”

Donna rolled her eyes and was about to open her mouth in reply, when Jack brought his arm around one of hers. Nodding at the Doctor, he hit a button on his vortex manipulator, and they vanished in a flash of light.

The Doctor wasted no time. He quickly arranged the second part of the equipment in a large pile, covering the boxes with a transport net, creating one single unit to make transmat easier. Then he searched the shelves for equipment that should have been taken out of store but hadn’t.

In the meantime, the banging from the doors got louder and eventually multiplied, when more guards reached the second entrance on the opposite end of the room. Unfortunately they’d been a lot less thorough with those locks than they had for the main entrance.

“Damn!”

He knew he was running out of time, but he needed to check the shelves. He’d never be able to come back to Xeriax, especially since his stubborn time ship was dead set against landing here ever again, even if Bad Wolf and he had repaired the cracks in the fabric of reality. On top of that, he had the feeling that acquiring spare parts for this equipment would be even more like looking for a needle in a haystack than finding spare parts for the TARDIS.

The sound of air being replaced by something else alerted him that Jack was back.

“Doc! We don’t have time. They’ll be through the doors in less than thirty seconds.”

Unfortunately Jack was right. And even if the Meteorological Service had been rather polite when arresting him for the first time, he severely doubted they’d be as nice when discovering that he was currently stealing their precious dimension crossing equipment, even if it was useless since they had closed the cracks in reality. But somehow he doubted they’d see it that way.

He glanced at the shelves for the last time, and discovered a small datacube in a corner. He grabbed it and sprinted towards Jack, his eyes on the doors that had finally opened. In the corridor he could see a small army, one line of soldiers kneeling on the floor, the other behind them. And each and every one of them was pointing a weapon at them.

He sped up even more, ignoring the shouts demanding them to stop and surrender. They were going to shoot any second now. And Jack was standing in their line of fire.

Jack looked at him, a fatalistic expression on his face, certain what would happen.

At the last possible second the Doctor jumped, pushing Jack to the floor, effectively using the large pile of equipment to shelter them both from the burst of the guards, and Jack pressed the return button on his vortex manipulator once again.

They found themselves on the dirty ground in front of the TARDIS.

Jack grinned at the Doctor. “You know, if you wanted to get me on my back, you only had to say the word, Doc!”

The Doctor got up and dusted off his leather jacket. “Buy me a drink first,” he grumbled.
Chapter Nineteen

As soon as they had brought the last part of the equipment inside and stored it in his workshop, the Doctor closed the TARDIS door behind them. “Right. The TARDIS should have recovered enough to send her into the Vortex, and then I’ll start working on—”

Donna turned around and faced him. “Oh no, you don’t. You’re too exhausted to even walk straight, let alone think. And don’t tell me that Time Lords don’t need sleep. You won’t do either Rose or you any good if you keep this up. So do me a favour and go to bed, or I’ll have Jack drag you.”

Jack crossed his arms and grinned, but before he could say anything the Doctor sent him a glare designed to turn someone to stone.

“In your dreams, Harkness.”

He turned to the console and initiated the dematerialisation sequence.

Unfortunately his TARDIS had decided that A) he deserved a rather bumpy dematerialisation for landing them on Xeriax in the first place and B) Donna was right. Therefore he not only ended up on the grating because he was too slow to grab the nearest coral strut, but she hid the door to his workshop. And since neither glaring at the ceiling nor cursing her was going to convince her otherwise, the Doctor went to bed.

He woke less than two hours later, covered in cold sweat.

He’d dreamed, but as they did most of the time when Rose wasn’t anywhere near, his dreams had turned into the stuff of nightmares. This time, it hadn’t been Daleks or the Time War; no, it had been just Rose, lying completely still on a hospital bed, by the looks of it kept alive only by the machines surrounding her.

He rubbed his hands over his face, praying that what he had seen had nothing to do with reality.

It wasn’t true. It couldn’t be. Not Rose, not like this.

He clung to the thought, because if he let go… He might as well let an abyss of insanity swallow him.

Knowing he wouldn’t be able to sleep, not now, preferably not ever, he took an icy shower in a futile attempt to wash the remnants of the nightmare away and returned to his workshop, hoping to distract himself by work.

Apparently the TARDIS had sensed his current state of distress, because she let the door reappear without putting up a fight, even if her hum sounded decidedly concerned.

He decided to ignore her, opened the first box of equipment with hands shaking so badly he could barely operate the complicated fastening, and set about to work.

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When Donna wandered into the galley late the next morning, Jack was already there, lounging in a chair, feet on the table.

She grinned at him. “I take it the Doctor’s not awake yet?”
He shook his head. “At least I haven’t seen him. Coffee?”

“Sure, thanks.”

“If you want scrambled eggs, they’re still warm. The TARDIS put them in stasis.”

“She can do that?”

“If you ask her nicely.” He sent her a megawatt smile.

When Donna had finished her breakfast, Jack said, “I don’t know about you, but I wouldn’t mind spending a day at the pool. If the TARDIS has recovered enough to open it for us, that is.”

“You’re having me on!” Donna exclaimed. “She has a pool?”

“He didn’t show you?”

Donna shook her head. “I spent days talking him into taking me to a spa on a wellness planet, after he had landed us on some planet in the middle of the monsoon season.”

Jack laughed. “I bet he loved that.”

“He was complaining the entire time, until he found something to explore. That was shortly before the running started.” She laughed as well.

“Come on, let’s see if the TARDIS has bathing clothes for us.” He eyed her speculatively. “Although I wouldn’t mind going skinny dipping.”

Donna swatted his arm. “Mind out of the gutter, Cowboy!”

Jack grinned at her. “Well, I can dream, can’t I?”

After a short trip to the wardrobe room, Jack showed Donna the way to the swimming pool. Apparently the TARDIS had recovered enough to let it reappear, but the little beach bar she had added on his second week on board was missing, along with the artificial waterfall and the little cave behind it.

“You don’t have to, if you’re still too exhausted,” Jack said to the ceiling.

The TARDIS replied by playing ‘Twisting by the pool’ through the sound system in the room, and he laughed. “Thanks, girl!”

They spent the day lounging at the swimming pool, occasionally going for a swim, one time getting into a water fight, until they dropped into the deck chairs the TARDIS had provided.

“I wonder why the Doctor hasn’t shown up yet,” Donna said.

Jack shrugged. “He almost never did. Rose and I used to spend long days in here, when we were stuck in the Time Vortex because he was doing some maintenance he couldn’t do while on a planet. One time Rose persuaded him to come along.” He grinned. “He couldn’t take his eyes off her.”

“Were they together then?”

“While I was with them? Not officially, no. But they might as well have been. Only had eyes for each other. I had barely set my foot on board, the Doctor put up big mauve signs saying ‘Hands off the blonde’.”
Donna laughed. “What was she like?” she asked, genuinely curious.

Jack sat up. “I don’t even know where to begin. Those who only looked at the surface saw nothing more than a shop girl from a council estate, with a bad dye-job and too much makeup. But if you really looked at her you saw an extraordinary girl.

“You know how he says that the TARDIS is bigger on the inside. That’s exactly who Rose is. When I met them for the first time, I tried to con them and almost condemned the entire Earth. It was Rose who convinced the Doctor to save my life and to let me stay. She saw me as a good man, and for her, I tried to be one.

“You’ve seen how the Doctor is now, but when she was with him… They were so beautiful together. It kills him that Rose had to save him and he doesn’t know if she is all right. This is the worst I have ever seen him, and that includes the time the Daleks kidnapped Rose at the Gamestation. If something happened to her while she tried to save him…” He trailed off.

Donna was silent for some time. Then she asked a question that had been nagging her since the day before. “What is Bad Wolf?”

“Rose. At least that’s what the Doctor told me. After we had gotten Rose back from the Daleks, we knew we only had one chance. We had to delay the Daleks long enough, so the Doctor could build a Delta wave. But he knew that he couldn’t keep Rose safe and sent her home in the TARDIS. The Daleks were already invading the Gamestation, and I was trying to buy him time. But then… the Daleks killed me.”

“But…” Donna apparently was a loss for words.

“How come I am still alive? I’ve been asking myself the same question for the longest time. I came back to life on an empty space station full of dust, and without the TARDIS. I didn’t know why I was not dead, and the TARDIS was gone. I used my vortex manipulator and transported back to Earth, aiming for the twenty-first century. Unfortunately I ended up in the nineteenth. The first time I died after that was in a fight on Ellis Island.”

Donna looked at him, thoroughly confused. “Let’s see if I got this right. The Doctor left you on an empty space station in the future, and you can’t die.”

“Got it in one. The Doctor told me the rest when I met him in Cardiff. Rose had merged with the TARDIS to save him, and so she created Bad Wolf. I still don’t know what exactly Bad Wolf is, but she is incredibly powerful. She not only destroyed an entire Dalek fleet, she also saved me, but a little bit too well. Instead of just resurrecting me she made me immortal. According to the Doctor, she doesn’t know. He never told her.”

Jack gave Donna a crooked grin, then sighed. “He can’t stand being near me. At least that’s what he said, that I feel wrong to him. What is more, Rose almost died that day, and she has always been his top priority. So he brought her to safety and at the same time ran from me. I get that. I just wished he’d come and found me sooner. Then I wouldn’t have spent hundred thirty years guessing what happened to me.”

“Git.”

“Yeah.”

Again they were silent, until Donna said, “Let’s go back to the galley and make dinner.” She grinned. “Maybe the scent of food is enough to lure Himself back into the land of the living.”
Jack laughed, but he wasn’t so sure. He doubted that the Doctor had slept for more than a couple of hours, since he normally didn’t need much sleep. He was fairly certain that the Doctor would have started assembling the dimension crossing equipment by now, if the TARDIS had let him back into his workshop, that was.

The Doctor didn’t show when dinner was ready, and Jack began to worry in earnest. Xeriax must have sapped his energy reserves. But the galley looked as if nobody had entered it after they left for the pool, so even if the Doctor was awake, he most likely hadn’t eaten. Before, the Doctor occasionally had immersed himself into a project for a couple of days, completely ignoring the need for food or sleep. Rose had always made sure that he ate with some regularity and sometimes even bullied him into going to bed. But without her…

“Is he really still asleep?” he asked the ceiling.

He received a hum that sounded decidedly negative and worried at the same time.

If the TARDIS sounded worried, things were most likely worse than he thought. “Where is he?”

Instantly a light began to glow in the corridor outside the galley.

“Wait here, Donna,” he said, not really sure what he might find.

She shook her head. “No way. I’m coming with you. You might need someone who can slap a bit of sense into him.” She gave him a grin that showed more bravado than she probably felt, then gazed at the ceiling. “Can you look after the food, old girl?”

She received a reassuring hum, but the worry underneath was still present.

Jack and Donna followed the lights, even if Jack knew after a few steps where they were headed. He had been right. The Doctor must have returned to his workshop sometime ago.

Although Jack suspected that the Doctor had locked himself in, he tried the doorknob. The door opened. He sent a silent thanks to the TARDIS, then observed the scene in front of him.

The room was a mess. Equipment was scattered on every surface that wasn’t littered with paper covered in the Doctor’s handwriting. The Time Lord was sitting on a stool, apparently having discarded his jacket some time ago, the sleeves of his jumper shoved up over his elbows. He was staring at a sheet of paper, completely oblivious to his surroundings or the two people who had just entered through the door he’d locked.

“Doctor?” Donna asked, taking a tentative step into the room.

As the Time Lord in question didn’t react, she took another step until she could reach him. She hesitantly touched his arm, and he jerked. He turned around and looked up at them. Donna’s breath caught at the desperation she could see in his eyes.

“Doctor?” she asked again.

“It’s not going to work,” he said, his voice so low she could barely hear him, even if she was standing no more than two feet away.

“What?” Donna asked, slightly confused.

“Even if I repair the equipment, I can’t get to her.”
Donna looked at him sympathetically. “You don’t know that. Not as long as you haven’t tried.”

The Doctor looked at her as if she had just proven to be exceptionally stupid. “Donna, I’m a Time Lord. My species used to cross dimensions like you cross a street. Believe me, if I tell you it’s impossible, it is impossible.”

“Have you slept?” she asked, ignoring what he had said before.

“That’s none of your business.”

Donna smiled briefly, but became serious again immediately. “That’s what I thought. You’re completely sleep-deprived, and I don’t think you’re thinking straight. Get some sleep, and things will look brighter in the morning.”

“As I said before, there’s no morning on the TARDIS. And I don’t need sleep.” His voice was dangerously low.

“Like hell you don’t. You’re about to collapse, and you know it. Rose is going to have your head for running yourself ragged, and you know that as well.”

“Once again, Donna, leave Rose out of it.”

“Not if waving her in your face is the only way to make you see reason.”

At this point the Doctor looked ready to strangle Donna, who in turn might start to spit fire any second. Jack stepped between them.

“Would you leave us alone for a moment, Donna?” he asked.

“No. Someone has to talk or probably slap some sense into this stubborn alien.” She looked as if she was going to carry out said threat any moment.

After what he had told her about the Doctor and Rose, Jack doubted she would do it, at least not while the Doctor was in this state of mind, but if the Time Lord managed to provoke her enough, he was likely to end up with her hand in his face. Since that was certainly not going to help the situation, he gave her a meaningful glance and said, “Donna, please.”

“Fine. I’ll be in the galley.” She left the room, mumbling something that sounded suspiciously like “Men.”

When she had left the room, Jack turned to the Doctor. “She’s right, you know. You need rest.”

“No, I don’t.”

“At the risk of sounding like a broken record, you do, Doctor.”

The Doctor avoided his eyes, and Jack suddenly understood.

“You’re afraid she won’t be there.”

The other man nodded slowly. “What if she’s…”

He didn’t finish the sentence, but Jack understood the implication anyway. “Doc, she’s not dead. You have to stop thinking that. She’s Rose. She’ll fight the hordes of hell to get back to you.”

“Jack, you don’t understand—”
The Doctor was exhausted, probably hadn’t slept even if the TARDIS had tried to force him, he wasn’t thinking straight, and now he was working himself into a full-fledged depression. He certainly wasn’t going to let that happen. He interrupted him ruthlessly.

“Doctor, out of the times you sleep, how often do you see her?”

“I don’t sleep much, Jack,” the Doctor sidestepped the question.

The former Time Agent rolled his eyes. “Don’t I know it. You avoid it until you almost collapse. But knowing Rose, she’ll have made you promise you’ll stick to a more or less regular sleep pattern. And with the additional incentive of possibly meeting her, you’ll have kept it. But I bet that you don’t see her every time.”

The Doctor grimaced. So he had been right about that.

“So, if you don’t see her this time, she’s probably busy, working overtime, or Jackie forced her to date some pretty boy.” Jack grinned, and to his amusement he could see the Doctor clench his fists.

“Jack…” The Doctor sounded outright dangerous.

“Doctor, really. Get some sleep. At least try. What you’re doing now doesn’t help anyone, and especially not Rose.”

The Doctor looked at his hands, which were trembling so badly he could barely hold his sonic screwdriver. Like this he was no use to anyone, let alone Rose. He stared at his hands for another moment, carefully positioned the sonic on the work bench, then turned his gaze back to Jack. “Fine. I’ll try.”

Jack sighed in relief. If he was honest, he hadn’t expected the Doctor to relent. He had to be even more exhausted than he let on. And maybe he would dream, and maybe Rose would be able to talk some sense into him — because if this went on for much longer, he feared for the Doctor’s sanity. And even if the Doctor’s sanity was questionable at times, he was fairly certain that his ‘normal’ craziness was nothing compared to a Doctor gone ‘round the bend.

The Doctor picked up his discarded leather jacket and turned towards the door. He was just reaching for the knob, when Jack suddenly remembered something.

“Doctor, I’ve been meaning to ask. In that storage room, why did you push me to the floor when the guards started shooting? I mean, I can’t die, so it didn’t really matter.”

The Time Lord turned around, and exhausted as he was, the Doctor still managed to give him a look that said that he had just dribbled on his coat. “It mattered to me.”

With that, he left the room.
Chapter Twenty

Rose stood on a roof terrace, observing the garden party below her. It could have been one of Pete’s Vitex parties, had it not been for the three or four purplish people on the dance floor. Every once in a while a few snatches of music or laughter wafted up to her, but compared to the parties she had become used to during the last few years it was rather quiet here. It seemed as if everyone was waiting for something.

A few years ago, she’d been here with the Doctor, shortly after Krop Tor. He’d promised her a ball, and fireworks that were famous throughout the entire quadrant. Of course they had never made it to the ball, because they had stumbled into an alien plot to take over the government, but she’d immediately fallen in love with the dress the TARDIS had laid out for her, the same dress she was wearing now.

She was dreaming, she knew it, but was it the right kind of dream?

Their last encounter between universes had been more than five months ago. At the time the Doctor had been almost mad with desperation, but she had been certain that she had brought him to his senses, and — even more importantly — that she had made clear that she didn’t want him to take risks with his life or, worse, the universe just to get her back. But then the TARDIS had screamed to her across the Void, and she had known that the Doctor was in fatal danger.

When she had merged with Bad Wolf she had not really been able to determine her surroundings. All she had been able to perceive was the presence of both the TARDIS and the Doctor, a dark entity he was fighting, and the fact that there were cracks in the fabric of the universe. How she knew that, she couldn’t tell, but they were there. And while she was certain that the Doctor didn’t have anything to do with their existence, she felt that they were dangerous, and so she had started closing them as soon as they had gotten rid of that entity, whatever it had been.

When she finally had had to leave, the Doctor had seemed more or less fine, but she didn’t know for sure. What if he was injured, mentally or physically? What if that fight had somehow damaged the bond between them? She sighed. The ‘what ifs’ were driving her crazy, had done so for weeks now.

But since the Bad Wolf Event, as Jake had nicknamed it, there had been no sign of the Doctor. She had been certain that he would try to contact her as soon as possible, but until now nothing had happened. She had tried to explain the silence with the TARDIS being too exhausted to bridge the Void, but that hadn’t stopped her from becoming more and more worried.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the feeling of a presence behind her. Someone had invaded her personal space. Being absolutely certain who it was, she stayed exactly where she was, and a relieved smile blossomed on her face. It was the right kind of dream, after all.

The Doctor’s arms closed around her from behind, and he rested his chin on her head.

“I thought I’d lost you,” he said, an undertone in his voice she couldn’t quite place.

She leant against him and her smile deepened. Fairly certain what he was referring to, she replied, “You haven’t.”

He took a step back and despite the warm night she felt suddenly cold without his embrace. Then he turned her around so she was facing him, and fixed her with his eyes.

“Do you have any idea how dangerous that was?” he asked, barely suppressed anger vibrating in his
voice. “It could have killed you.”

“Pot meet kettle, kettle meet pot,” Rose said drily. “Don’t tell me whatever you did couldn’t have killed you.”

“I knew what I was doing.”

“Yeah, right. And because you knew what you were doing the TARDIS had to pull Bad Wolf across the Void to save you.” Rose knew she was getting louder, but she didn’t care. All the uncertainty and worry of the last couple of weeks suddenly took over, and rational thought left the vicinity rather quickly.

“At least I knew what was going on,” he declared, still sounding furious. “You didn’t even know what was happening!”

“Apart from the fact that the TARDIS was screaming for help, no, I had no idea what was happening, and I still don’t know what exactly almost killed you.”

“Right. And because you didn’t know what was happening you decided to do something really stupid and merge with the TARDIS. Again. In case you hadn’t noticed, that almost got you killed the first time.”

Rose winced as if he had hit her. He hadn’t called her stupid since the day he had taken her to meet her father. She took a step back, away from him, without even realising that she was moving, and leant against the balustrade behind her.

The Doctor seemed to notice that something was wrong and reached for her. “Rose…”

She crossed her arms and took a deep breath. “No, Doctor. It doesn’t work like that. You don’t throw yourself into danger to get me back — and don’t tell me that wasn’t the reason you ended up in that situation in the first place — and then deny me the right to help you, in fact calling me stupid for doing what I still think was right.”

The Doctor averted his eyes for a long moment, then looked at her again. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it. I just… I can’t lose you.”

She gave him a sad smile. “Doctor, don’t you see? I don’t want to lose you either.” She closed the distance between them and cupped his cheek. “I just did what felt right. I knew the TARDIS wouldn’t have called me if there had been any other way. And so I came.”

“Rose, it could have killed you,” the Doctor repeated, but he sounded calmer than before. “What we’re doing here is possible because we’re both asleep, but when you crossed the Void, both of us were awake. And even if you survived it, you could have ended up in a coma or with severe brain damage. Until now I didn’t even know if you were alive — and still you.”

“Doctor, don’t you think that doing nothing while I knew you were in danger and probably could do something about it might have killed me as well?” Then she gave him a cheeky grin. “Besides, someone once told me that I’m jeopardy friendly.”

His lips twitched with barely suppressed humour. “That you are. And since I doubt that I can make you promise to never do something like this again, will you at least promise me that you’ll be careful?”

She raised her eyebrows. “I’ll be careful, but only if you promise me the same. Because I know you, Doctor, and I’m fairly certain you wouldn’t have been in whatever trouble you managed to find if
you hadn’t seen a chance to get me back.”

“Fine,” he grumbled. “I’ll be careful.”

Rose shoved her hands under his jacket and pulled him nearer. “I love you,” she said.

Slowly his arms came back around her. “I love you.”

He rested his chin on her head once more, and for some time they just stood there, on a roof terrace that only existed in their minds, listening to the music of the ball the Doctor had once promised her, content to hold each other.

“How is it that you always find me?” Rose asked eventually. “I mean, both of us should be dreaming at the moment, so why can’t I find you?”

“Two reasons, really. One, I’m the telepath; and two, I’m the one in the same universe as the TARDIS, and she is the one guiding us here.”

Rose frowned. “But you said I was telepathic — and I wouldn’t have been able to cross the Void when the TARDIS called me if I wasn’t.”

“True, but your telepathy is still developing, and very weak compared to mine.” He paused, suddenly becoming extremely serious. “At this point we have no idea how strong you might become one day. That doesn’t mean, however, that you should run around with an unprotected mind. You need defences.”

“Defences?”

“For starters, a shield to protect your mind from other telepaths. Even if most telepathic species abhor entering minds without permission, there are others that would violate yours just for the fun of it — or to gain information.”

“And how do I get a shield?”

“I’m going to explain to you what you have to do, and you have to practice regularly, Rose, that’s important.” He looked her in the eyes. “It would be easier if I could show you, but we’d need physical contact for that.” The disappointment was evident in his voice, even if he tried to hide it.

“Which we don’t have, because we are not in the same universe,” Rose said, knowing where his disappointment came from. He had once told her that he had been able to feel his people in his head, like a background hum, but since the Time War that was gone. The bond that was developing between them would help to ease the emptiness in his mind, but it wasn’t strong enough yet, and that would change only if she ever found a way home.

“Right.” He looked around and pointed to the left, where a small bench stood in front of the balustrade. “Take a seat.”

Rose suspected that his lesson about building telepathic shields would take some time, and she looked at the bench in displeasure. The small piece of garden decoration was wrought iron, apparently hadn’t been painted in ages, so the colour was already flaking off, and it looked extremely uncomfortable.

“Not exactly what I would describe as ‘comfy’,” she said. “Can’t we do that elsewhere, or, I dunno, change it, like you did the last time, when you brought us to that planet with the blue grass?”
“Course we can. Or rather you.” He grinned at her. “Consider this the first part of your lesson.”

He took her hands in his. “I’ll tell you what to do in the beginning, but you should always follow your instincts. It’s a bit different for everyone. Changing something’s easier if it’s not a living thing, and if you have memories to work with. And as you might have noticed, it doesn’t work with food at all.”

She grinned at him. “How could I forget that dinner I never got? Even if it is a bit Harry Potter, don’t you think?”

He grinned back. “Yes, a bit. Now close your eyes and imagine how you want it to be.”

Rose closed her eyes and concentrated on the bench, thinking about the one in Pete’s garden she frequently occupied to watch the stars at night. It was made of mahogany, and she always brought a few cushions and a blanket to make it more comfortable. Thus equipped, the bench was almost perfect; all it was lacking was the Doctor, holding her in his arms and telling her stories about the stars above them.

She could feel the Doctor’s hands holding hers, slightly cool to the touch, but reassuring nonetheless.

“Open your mind, Rose,” the Doctor murmured into her ear. “Imagine how the seat will feel under your fingers, when you touch the surface. Imagine the scratches it got from daily use. Imagine how the colour changes during the day, depending on how the sun shines on it…”

His voice had an almost hypnotic effect on her, caressing her mind as his thumbs caressed her hands.

If someone asked her, she couldn’t have said how much time had passed until she was certain that the picture in her mind was accurate, but the Doctor seemed to be able to pinpoint the exact moment.

“And now push,” he said.

Even if he didn’t explain what he meant, instinctually she knew. She took the picture in her mind and shoved it into reality.

The Doctor let go of her hands. “Take a look. That what you imagined?”

She opened her eyes, turned around and looked at the bench, smiling, albeit a bit exhausted.

“Just as I imagined. Well, almost.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Wrong colour?”

She laughed. “No. It looks perfect, like it ought to be. I just always imaged the two of us sitting there, gazing at the stars.”

He smiled. “Even if the star gazing will have to wait until you know at least the basics about mental shields, that doesn’t mean we can’t make use of the bench.”

He took her hand and led her to the seat, sat down and pulled her into his arms.
“Better?”

“Perfect.” She snuggled into him. “So, how do those mental shields work?”

The Doctor enfolded her in his arms and entwined his fingers with hers. “Imagine a fortress. Most of them have not just one, but multiple lines of defence, a moat, an outer wall, sometimes an inner wall, and as a last resort a keep. You can make do with the keep alone, but it helps to have the other defences as well, even if their only purpose is to buy you time until someone comes to your rescue.

“The same principle applies to mental shields. The more you have, the longer it takes an assaulter to get through them, and that gives you time to figure out a strategy to fight them. That is, if you know what you’re doing and are able to keep up all your different shields at the same time. However, you need lots of training to do that. Therefore you start with one shield, and add others later.”

“And how do I do that?”

The Doctor slightly adjusted his position on the seat, still holding Rose in his arms. “All in all, it’s not so different from what you did with the bench…”

~o~o~o~

About an hour later the Doctor finally fell silent, having given Rose what he called a ‘basic overview’ about mental shields, which made her head spin nonetheless.

After a long pause, during which she tried to sort through the information he had given her, she said, “I miss you.”

Knowing that he would blame himself for that, she continued quickly, “It’s not your fault. It’s just… hard sometimes. I know we will find a way, Doctor, even if it takes us another couple of years, but –”

“Another couple of years?” he croaked and sat up, almost toppling Rose off the bench in the process. “Rose, what year is it in Pete’s world?”

“2016. Why do you ask?”

He stared at her, horrified, and muttered something under his breath that could only be a curse. “The universes are drifting faster apart. When we ended up in Pete’s World for the first time the universes were aligned, but when Pete pulled me over during the battle of Canary Wharf more than three years had passed for him, and less than six months for your Mum. Canary Wharf is less than a year ago for me and Donna, but your universe is more than eight years ahead, and if this continues...”

He got up and made two long steps away from the bench, unable to sit still any longer.

Rose followed him. “What do you mean?”

“A few years don’t matter, but if the deviation becomes too large… Have you ever seen how navy ships refuel at sea?”

She shook her head, confused by what seemed a sudden change of topic.

“Crossing from one universe into the other is a similar concept. To refuel, two vessels adopt identical course and speed, then make a connection. But both ships have to compensate for wind and swell constantly, because otherwise the distance between them or the deviation of speed becomes too large, which might not only disrupt the connection, but one of them might sink the other.” Or both, he didn’t say but she understood anyway.
“The universes will collapse if the discrepancy is too large,” she stated. It wasn’t a question.

“As soon as I open the portal,” he confirmed her thoughts. “Not that I have any idea how to do that at the moment, or when the divergence reaches its critical point.” He paused and looked away for a moment, then continued, “It wouldn’t matter if there were other Time Lords around to help. They would simply compensate for the deviation. But without them…” His voice trailed off, but the desperation in his eyes told her all she needed to know. He thought it was impossible.

Well, she had removed the word from her dictionary years ago.

Once again she buried her arms under his jacket and looked up at him. “We’ll think of something, yeah?”

“Rose…”

“No, Doctor.” She took a step back and poked his chest with her finger. “No giving up. We’re both too stubborn for that. Besides, it would prove my mum right, and we’re not gonna give her that.”

He laughed, albeit a bit forced, and pulled her back into his arms. “Yeah, can’t have Jackie being right about something, can we?” Then he became serious again. “You know, I’ve got no idea what I did to deserve you.”

“That’s because —“

Rose never finished her sentence, because suddenly something exploded over their heads. She turned in surprise. The entire western sky was sparkling with fireworks in thousands of colours.

“It’s beautiful!”

“It is. And it’s more than just simple fireworks. Just watch.”

Rose leant against the Doctor and looked at the sky, and eventually she began to make out patterns. What before had seemed like random spirals and circles in the sky turned out to be figures and images, telling stories of times long gone, of war and peace, of danger and friendship, and of love, always of love.

She only noticed that she was crying when the Doctor turned her around and gently wiped her tears away.

“Shhh. Don’t cry, love.”

“I…”

“Shhh,” he repeated, then tilted her chin up and kissed her gently.

The feeling of his lips on hers finally brought Rose back to her senses. She brought her arms around his neck and kissed him back.

Despite all that had happened, and despite their chances of a reunion being at an all-time low, they took their time, savouring the kiss. Then they began to divest each other of their clothes, slowly, as if they had all the time in the world, until both wore nothing more than the reflection of the fireworks on their skin. For the rest of the night the Doctor and Rose Tyler made love to each other, until they finally fell asleep in each other’s arms, somewhere between universes, under a sky still glowing in every colour imaginable.
Two weeks later Rose Tyler’s life went to hell.
Chapter Twenty-One

Rose Tyler had seen the Devil, but this, this was hell.

A few months ago, Trafalgar Square had been teeming with people, tourists from all over the world taking snapshots of the various sites, visitors queuing in front of the security check of the National Gallery, people taking a break and basking in the sun. Occasionally Rose had come here as well, whenever she had been particularly frustrated at her lack of progress with her theory about dimension crossing, in an attempt to forget that she was in the wrong universe, even if it was just for a few minutes. After all, Trafalgar Square was one of the very few places in London where the differences were minimal, unlike the rest of the city.

Now the red banners that had hung next to the entrance of the National Gallery were gone, Nelson’s Column had fallen and the statue been destroyed. The streets were deserted and covered with debris. Occasionally a scruffy figure moved from shadow to shadow, looking for food and water, casting hate-filled glances at the Torchwood SUV driving by.

Rose winced behind the steering wheel, knowing where the hatred came from. The general public, in need of a scapegoat they could blame for the situation, had chosen Torchwood, the part of the government whose sole purpose was to prevent events like this — and they had failed.

It had begun on a completely normal Tuesday, three months ago. Rose had arrived at work, where she was greeted by Tony who had accompanied Pete so Jackie could have a day to herself. Then the aliens had appeared on every TV screen on the planet, simply stating that Earth now belonged to their Empire. They’d never even said who they were; just that Earth should surrender to them.

Immediately afterwards the government had imposed a curfew and proposed negotiations, while Torchwood and every other government agency on the planet dealing with aliens on a daily basis had tried to find out who the invaders were. They had failed, everyone had failed, and then, only a few hours after the first announcement, a trigger-happy politician on the other side of the planet had decided to solve the problem with a nuclear missile that hadn’t as much as scratched the coating of the alien command ship.

For another couple of hours the entire planet seemed to hold their breath, everyone hoping against all odds that the aliens had given up. Then the answer came. Military bases all over the planet were attacked first, followed by the capitals of the PRGB, the US, France, Russia, China and New Germany, until the most powerful countries on the planet were left without a functional government and without the ability to launch an effective military attack. To everyone’s surprise the aliens had attacked mainly the government districts, leaving other parts of the cities with only minimal damage, mostly from stray bombs, like the one that had hit Trafalgar Square.

In the beginning Torchwood hadn’t even realised that something else was going on, too occupied with the more obvious part of the attack and under the impression that the curfew was still effective. Then the first reports about missing people came in from all parts of the country, and they knew what the nameless aliens were after. Humans.

As soon as the invasion had begun, Rose had tried to reach Jackie, hoping that maybe her mum had changed her plans and stayed at home. When she couldn’t get a hold of her, she tried to tell herself that it was due to the breakdown of the mobile phone network. At that point she had still hoped that her mum had stayed inside even after the curfew had been lifted. But after a few hours it became clear that she had been among those taken during the first wave.
And it hadn’t stopped. The transmats had continued, day after day, and soon people began to realise that the surface wasn’t safe anymore. They sought shelter in protected buildings or under the ground, in the Tube or the canalisation. Public life ceased to exist within days. The attack extinguished almost every visible sign of executive authorities, and after a few weeks the set of morals people had been raised with had dissolved into nothing, the veneer of civilisation vanished. What remained was sometimes barely more than an animal, only driven by the instinct to survive. The situation got worse day by day. People were lacking everything, food, clean water, sometimes even the space to lie down for a rest.

Since she had started travelling with the Doctor, Rose had learned to detach herself from the worst of the suffering so she would be able to help, like a doctor treating a patient, but now she was struggling for a bit of distance. More often than not, she failed. Even if this was not the her original universe, this was not just another planet suffering from an alien invasion. This was Earth... And her mum was missing.

The people stranded in Torchwood Tower were better off than most. They had the ability to produce their own drinking water, as long as they kept showers to a minimum, but they were running out of supplies quickly. Since the third day of the attack everything was strictly rationed and prioritised. The focus was on the operative agents and the research teams, since their expertise would be needed to fight the aliens — if they ever discovered a weakness. The children were much further down on the list. They weren’t starving, not yet, but what they got was a far cry from what they really needed.

Rose and a few Torchwood employees whose kids had been in Torchwood day care on that fateful day had tried to convince Pete to redirect more of their rations to the children. Pete had shaken his head, the look in his eyes telling them that he knew exactly what his decision might mean for his son.

“I can’t. I know it’s hard, and I wouldn’t do it if I could see any other way, but we have to prioritise. The agents and the lab staff are our only chance to fight the Nameless, and things will only get worse for our kids, for every child on Earth, if we don’t find a way to defeat them.”

His words had driven home once again that they were at war, that their entire planet was at war, and that the best way to save their children was to work as hard as possible to defeat the invaders. Even though they were still not happy with the situation, the group had shared looks of understanding with Pete and returned to work with renewed determination.

In the beginning Tony had been asking for his mum, every single day. Pete and Rose had agreed not to tell him what had happened, things were bad enough for the little boy already, without them adding to it. Instead Rose had made up a story about Jackie being stuck in another part of London, but had run out of white lies quickly and ignored any further inquiry. She couldn’t bear it, couldn’t bear the thought that maybe her mum was dead. She clung to the fact that the Nameless had transmatted their victims, instead of just killing them, because they needed the humans for something, but that didn’t mean that they would stay alive for long...

Eventually Tony’s questions had ceased, but Rose knew he had cried himself into sleep more often than she wanted to think about. Whenever she could she brought him something of her ration, a piece of bread, a slice of an apple — something her spoilt little brother wouldn’t have considered worth a second glance weeks before, but now his eyes lit up. It broke what was still left of her heart, every day a little bit more. His sad smiles were killing her.

After Jackie’s disappearance Rose had taken a leaf from the Doctor’s book and thrown herself into work. She just didn’t want to think about her mum. It probably wasn’t healthy, but it kept her sane. More or less. She took every assignment that would get her out of Torchwood Tower, because the atmosphere was giving her the creeps. There had always been a faction of directors who called for a
less friendly approach towards aliens than the course Pete had adopted, but since the attack the number of their supporters had grown immensely, especially in the scientific departments.

When Mickey and his team had brought the first three prisoners in, Matt Powell had demanded them to be dissected, so they could find a potential weakness. Pete had put an end to the budding discussion quickly, allowing the scientists only to interrogate the prisoners and use only non-invasive forms of examination, but Rose doubted it would stay that way. Situations like this tended to bring out the worst in people. It already had begun. Everyone who wanted to could see the signs.

Neither the interrogation nor the examination had brought any insights, and after a few days the calls for more drastic interrogation methods became louder, along with clamours for the blood of their alien prisoners. And it didn’t stop with the aliens. Some people in the inner circle were talking about giving steroids and stimulants to the operatives, to enhance their strength and their stamina. Pete was arguing against the idea, but the number of supporters was growing. Many people were already afraid to speak their mind. If this went on much longer they wouldn’t need the aliens to defeat them. They’d do it themselves.

Rose shook her head in an attempt to clear it. She was tired to the bones, and her sleep cycle was completely off. She hadn’t dreamed for weeks, since before all of this had begun. She survived on catnaps and large quantities of a liquid that barely deserved to be called coffee. The best that could be said about it was that it contained caffeine.

With effort she turned her attention back to her surroundings. Her teammate Daniel and she were on a mission in Westminster. Ever since the attack that had destroyed Downing Street the area had been completely deserted, only stray dogs and a few people in search of water and food moving from shadow to shadow. Even after the Slitheen had attacked her universe’s London she hadn’t thought she’d ever be afraid in the city at daytime, but this was downright creepy.

Daniel pointed at a roofed gap between two houses. “Let’s leave the SUV there and walk. The car might draw attention.”

Without another word, Rose parked the car and they got out. Torchwood had received reports that aliens had been seen in this part of the town, so Rose and Daniel had been sent on a recon mission. However, she was almost certain that the aliens were nothing more than human scavengers looking for anything valuable left behind. The Nameless had sent a few teams to the surface, true, but not many, and never to an abandoned area. Torchwood had wondered why they didn’t simply invade the planet, their fleet just hanging in orbit while they transmatted people. They hoped that answering this question was a step down the road to get rid of them, but until now the behaviour of the aliens remained a mystery. At least that meant that the people who had sought shelter underground were safe from direct attacks, as long as they didn’t venture to the surface.

Daniel and she kept in the shadows in an attempt not to draw attention to themselves. They knew the shadows wouldn’t offer any protection against a transmat beam, but chances were that the invaders wouldn’t waste any resources on an area where the chances of making more human captives were almost non-existent. More important, however, was to avoid being seen by humans. Even if most of them were harmless, just struggling to support their families, there were others that thrived on the legal vacuum that had formed, stealing from fellow humans, killing for a cup of water. There were even rumours of cannibalism.

When her mobile rang it was almost a shock. She hadn’t received a call on her phone since just before the invasion - since her mum had called to ask if she wanted her to bring her some groceries, in fact. She had only brought it out of habit. All operatives used their radios for official communication with Torchwood Tower, and most of the network had been destroyed by the
invaders. The caller ID surprised her even more. Mickey and she had argued about not telling Tony what had happened to Jackie and not talked about anything not business-related ever since.

“Shut it off!” Daniel hissed. “They’ll hear us.”

She ignored him and answered the call. If Mickey went out of his way to call her in the first place and used her superphone it had to be important.

Mickey’s tone was brisk, and his news chilled her to the bone. “Tony’s run off. We think he’s entered the sewers.”

It took a moment for the message to sink in, then her mind went into overdrive. ‘Bloody hell’ summed it up rather nicely. If she wanted to she could also use words from at least half a dozen alien languages that covered the situation and which the TARDIS would refuse to translate. It took her a few seconds to realise that her mind was stuck on rambling, and she concentrated on the call.

“Why would he...? Never mind. I’ll be right back.”

“No! Whatever you do, don’t come here, Rose. You’ll end up in front of a court martial,” Mickey told her.

“I don’t care.”

“Rose…” He sounded concerned.

“I don’t care, Mickey! He’s my brother.”

“I know. But you can’t.”

“Meeting point?”

“Rose, no. You can’t. You’re already under surveillance because they think you’re too alien-friendly. If you leave your post they’ll degrade you or kick you out. You know how it is outside, and Pete can’t protect you, or he’ll lose what is left of his influence, and that’ll make everything worse for everyone.”

“Do you really think that matters to me? I can’t lose Tony.” Not, after her mum… She stopped herself firmly from finishing that line of thought. She couldn’t afford to think about that now.

She heard a sigh. “Somehow I knew you would say that. Bank Underground Station.”

“Are you serious? Through the tunnels that’s almost five miles from the headquarters. He’s not even four. He never would have made it that far on his own. Did you trace his transponder?”

Since a few days after the initial attack, every person in Torchwood Tower had to wear a small transponder that controlled access to certain parts of the building and constantly reported the current position of the bearer. Rose normally considered this a massive intrusion into her privacy and she had tried to talk Pete out of it when one of the tech geeks came up with the idea, but this once she was glad about it.

“I tracked him as soon as we realized he was missing. The signal was moving in that direction until we lost it under the Thames.”

“Okay. Five minutes.”

“Understood. Oh, and Rose? Remember, they can trace your transponder as well.” With that,
Mickey hung up.

Rose pocketed her phone and turned to Daniel. “I’ve gotta go. I’ll be back as soon as possible.”

He stared at her as if she’d been speaking an alien language. “Where are you going? They gave us an order.”

She nearly snapped at him. Every second she wasted was a second too much. After all that had happened she couldn’t lose her little brother. Not like this. She just couldn’t. She had lost too much already. She took a deep breath and organised her thoughts. Her training had enabled her to summarise a situation in a few concise sentences. “My brother has vanished and Mickey thinks he’s entered the sewers. I have to go and find him.”

Her partner considered her for a moment. “I’ll come with you.”

She simply nodded, turned on her heel and took the direct route back to the SUV. After three steps she broke into a run.

She took the driver’s seat, started the engine, ignored the constant beeping telling her she should use her seatbelt and sped up. Only when Daniel cursed because she took a bend almost too fast she realised that he was in the car. Buildings blurred into a wall of stone and glass, and for once she completely ignored the view that normally felt like a punch in the gut - the empty spot on the other side of the Thames where the London Eye was situated in her own universe. Four minutes and thirty-five seconds later she stopped with squealing tyres in front of the tube station. Twenty seconds later another SUV arrived, and Mickey jumped out, followed by Jake.

“Right. Where’s the tracking system?” were her first words. No time to lose.

“Did you agree on a story why you left your post?” Mickey asked while handing her a small hand-held computer.

“No time. And I honestly don’t care.”

He gripped her at the shoulders and shook her, forcing her to look at him. “Rose, I need you to listen. You have to think before you act. You know what’s going on in the meetings. Pete is losing more and more ground. You know what will happen if the majority of the directors decide that they’re no longer interested in keeping this country a democracy. It’s bad enough that we didn’t get rid of the curfews and the zone system before all of this started, but when Powell and his friends get the upper hand it’s going to get worse. Even if we stop the aliens this will be even less a free country than it is now. We fought too hard against Lumic to let that happen again.”

“But since we know you better than you think, we’ve got a plan,” Jake cut in. “In Westminster you saw two Nameless on what looked like flying motorcycles. You followed them here, where you met us.”

“It’s our free shift and I dropped a few words in the ready room that we might go looking for supplies, so nobody will wonder that we’re outside,” Mickey added.

Then Jake continued, “We decided that Daniel should go back to Westminster with me and make sure that there are no other Nameless around, while you and Mickey go down into the tunnels, because Daniel and you saw them vanishing here. And if you happen to run into your little brother in the meantime…” He looked at her meaningfully.

Rose nodded. “Sounds good to me. It would have been against Torchwood policy to leave a single team member behind, especially without transport, so it makes sense that Daniel and I went both.
Also, with the CCTV out of order, they don’t know we just invented the aliens.”

“And what are your flying motorcycles supposed to look like?” Daniel asked. He looked a lot more comfortable since Jake had said that he should return to Westminster with him.

Despite the situation, Rose grinned suddenly. “Easy. Just vaguely describe the speeder bikes from Star Wars and make them brown. No one’s going to notice. After all, people are stupid.”

Mickey laughed outright at that.

“She’s right,” Jake said, noticing that Daniel still looked uncertain. “You can always explain away any differences in your description with your surprise and them being extremely fast. Just stay vague enough.”

Daniel nodded slowly.

Rose smiled at Mickey and Jake. “Thank you.”

“Anytime, Rose,” Jake gave back, then turned to Daniel. “Let’s go.”

Ten seconds later, the SUV was gone.
This chapter carries an "Explicit" rating for more than one reason. Consider yourself warned.

The escalators had been out of order ever since the first attack, but at least they could be used as a flight of stairs, however exhausting it might be to descend them. For some reason the stairs always seemed to be slightly too high to make comfortable steps.

“Good thing this isn’t Covent Garden,” Mickey said when they reached the second sublevel. “I hate that circular staircase.”

“Yeah,” Rose gave back monosyllabically, her eyes slowly adjusting to the darkness around her that was only occasionally illuminated by emergency lighting. She shivered involuntarily. Everything here just felt wrong, the darkness, the absence of people, the silence. Even though the Nameless barely set foot on Earth, the tube stations were dangerous because they could be easily accessed from the surface. So the refugees had sought shelter deeper in the tunnels, avoiding the stations and the dangers that lurked there as much as possible.

“Right,” Mickey said, interrupting her thoughts. He looked at the tracking device. “Still no signal. I guess there’s still too much concrete between Tony and us. Maybe we can locate him when we’re on the same level.” He paused for a moment, trying to make out the direction signs in the dark. “The signal was following the course of the Northern Line earlier. That’d be one floor down.” He pointed in the direction of the next escalator. “That way.”

His behaviour, while completely professional, was a far cry from the way they normally interacted, and Rose knew the reason. She laid a hand on his arm, stopping him. “I’m sorry, Mickey. I shouldn’t have called you an…, well, you know.”

“A complete moron?” he asked scathingly.

Rose winced. “Yeah, that.”

“Or an idiot with the empathic skills of a stone?” he added, once again starting to walk into the direction he had indicated earlier.

She winced again. “And that.”

“Or a —”

“I’m really sorry, Mickey,” she repeated, interrupting him. She didn’t want to be reminded of what else she had said to her oldest friend. She had been wrong and she knew it.

“I know that we’ll have to tell Tony what happened to Mum, Mickey. I know that. But she’s my Mum, and I won’t give up hope. Not yet. Not until we know what happened to them.”

“Rose, you know what the people from Intelligence say. They’re most likely dead —”
She shook her head. “They can repeat it as often as they like, I won’t believe it. If they simply wanted them dead they wouldn’t have had to transmat them. It just doesn’t make sense.”

“…and even if they aren’t they might as well be, because we can’t get to them.” Mickey continued his sentence as if Rose hadn’t said anything.

Rose sighed. “Let’s not get into that again. I don’t think one will persuade the other today. I’ll tell Tony that Mum was abducted by the Nameless, but first we have to find him.”

Mickey nodded. “I guess I can live with that.”

But even if he had accepted her decision and probably even her apology, Rose felt that they had lost something irretrievable. The friendship that had begun on a cloudy day on that small playground on the estate when she was four years old had taken a huge blow, and she didn’t know if they would ever be able to fix it. She would probably lose her oldest friend, and it was her fault.

She gave him a tiny smile, once more concentrating on the task at hand. “But the point still stands, Mickey. It’s almost five miles from Torchwood Tower. A four year old child would never have made it so far on its own.”

“Maybe he has run into a group of scavengers,” he suggested.

Rose shivered involuntarily. Most scavengers were pretty harmless, looking for food or water in abandoned houses, but she had heard too many rumours of some of them having resorted to eating the weakest members of their respective communities not to believe that there was a grain of truth to them.

Mickey noticed her discomfort and took her hand. “Hey, you can’t just assume the worst. Maybe they just picked him up because he was alone and they wanted to help him.”

Rose nodded, but more for his sake than for hers. With everyone fighting for their own survival and for the survival of their next of kin, acts of kindness had become extremely rare. And even if the rumours of cannibalism were probably exaggerated, she couldn’t convince herself that Tony was safe until he was back in Torchwood Tower.

Eventually they reached the next sublevel, and Mickey activated the tracking device once again.

“Nothing.”

Seeing Rose’s expression he added, “That doesn’t mean anything. He’s probably still out of reach…”

Rose tried to remember this London’s tube map. For the most part it was identical to the one she had used for almost twenty years, but some parts of the tube system were different.

“Let’s assume he really is with a group of people. They first followed the Jubilee and then the Northern line, and that’s when you lost the signal, right?” The DLR was mostly overground here as well, so she could rule that out.

Mickey nodded.

“I guess in that case it’s safe to say they’ve already passed this station. They didn’t use Waterloo & City, because if they wanted to go in that part of town, why take the Northern line at all. That leaves us with the Northern line, Central and District, since Circle doesn’t exist here.”
Mickey grinned, despite the situation. “I love it when you go all Doctor on me!”

Rose grinned back, albeit a bit forced. “People are mostly hiding in the old tube stations that are no longer in use,” she continued, thinking aloud. “There’s British Museum on the Central line, St Mary’s/Whitechapel Road and the old part of Tower Hill on the District line, and City Road on the Northern Line in the relative vicinity. Apart from that, no idea.”

She looked at him, trying to keep her feelings out of her voice and miserably failing. “We just have to take a shot and hope we’re right.”

“Wanna throw a coin?” Mickey asked with a grin designed to cheer her up, but failing as well.

Rose straightened her back. “Let’s start with the two stations on the District line. If we’re wrong, we can always follow Hammersmith & City back to Moorgate and go northern from there.”

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The air in the tunnels was stale and stuffy, the ventilation system out of order since a few weeks. Rose and Mickey both had donned filter masks as soon as they had entered the tunnels to keep most of the particles they raised with every step out of their lungs, but it was hard to breathe nonetheless.

Most of the emergency lights in the tunnels still worked, not enough to ensure they could see everything, but at least they could determine their surroundings without a torch. Even though both had night vision devices, they had decided against using them, because they would have to give account for draining the batteries on a mission that technically wasn’t even officially approved.

Instead Mickey had picked up a thin metal rod he moved carefully in front of him to detect obstacles when the emergency lights were not enough to help him determine the state of the ground. Rose had wrapped the lower end of the rod in a cloth she had found in one of her pockets, so it wouldn’t make a sound if Mickey hit something. They couldn’t afford to be detected prematurely by whoever had Tony.

After a few hundred metres of stumbling through the darkness they reached their first destination, Tower Hill. The station seemed completely empty, even the old part that could have served as shelter. Both briefly activated their NVDs, taking a closer look at their surroundings, then deactivated them again.

“Why do you think nobody is here?” Mickey asked.

“I dunno. But there’s lots of open ground around the station. Maybe there were just not enough people left in the area after the first attacks to come down here in seek of protection. Or they are just too afraid of the Nameless to stay so close to the surface. It’s only a few hundred metres from the entrance of Tower Hill to the old part of the station.”

“Or they are hiding from us.”

Rose nodded. “That’s another possibility. Too many people think the attack is somehow Torchwood’s fault, or that at least we should have prevented it. We’ll just have to keep our eyes and ears open, in case someone follows us.”

They exchanged glances, then quickly crossed the open space between the tunnel ends, until they were once again in the relative safety of the tunnel, and continued their search.

They were already near Aldgate East, when Mickey missed a step and twisted his ankle.
He tried to put weight on the foot, only to wince so hard that Rose could see the motion in the near-darkness around them.

“I think it’s sprained,” he said. “Damn Matthew Powell and his latest attempt to save money by always choosing the cheapest supplier. These boots are rubbish.” He quietly cursed the former head of biological research who had followed Jane Cunningham as budget controller, after Pete had taken away his former responsibilities, not really trusting that the other man’s ethical standards actually were those needed in such a sensitive position.

“Do you think you can still walk?” Rose asked worriedly.

Once again Mickey tried to put weight on the foot, only to shake his head. “Maybe after a rest.”

“And what now?” she asked, fearing that a delay would put Tony into danger.

He shrugged. “You go on looking for Tony.”

“And what about you? I can’t leave you here. We don’t even know if there isn’t someone following us!” she protested. “Let alone that they’ll have our heads if we split up.”

“Don’t worry about me. I’ll try to follow you slowly and have your rear. And since when exactly do you actually follow the ‘Don’t wander off’ rule?” Mickey added nonchalantly.

Rose hesitated for a moment, then her fear for her brother won out on her worry about her friend. “Thanks, Mick!”

She hugged him briefly, then picked up the rod and once again followed the tunnel towards Aldgate East.

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Aldgate East seemed to be as deserted as Tower Hill, and while she had expected it, with people hiding deeper in the tunnels, the deserted station still gave her the creeps. She briefly activated her NVD, but couldn’t discern more than she already had. The station seemed empty, but she couldn’t shake the feeling that she was being watched.

For a moment her thoughts went back to Mickey, hoping that he was alright and able to follow her. She hadn’t liked leaving him behind, but she also needed to get to Tony.

Rose quickly crossed the open space of the station, then entered the tunnels again. Only a few hundred metres until she reached St Mary’s/Whitechapel Road, and if the abandoned tube station was empty as well, she would have to make a decision. Return to the surface and call Jake to get Mickey back to Torchwood, or go on looking for Tony. Rationally she knew what she should do, that it was incredibly dangerous to continue searching for Tony on her own, but he was her little brother. She couldn’t just leave him.

She paused for a moment to wipe her forehead and get her rambling mind back under control. She just couldn’t afford to be distracted, or else she wouldn’t be any help to Tony anyway. For a brief moment she closed her eyes and concentrated, trying to distance herself from her fear for Tony, then picked up the rod again and continued her way through the tunnel, even more careful than before, still unable to shake the feeling that someone was watching her.

About a quarter of an hour later, Rose finally reached her destination. She stopped about two metres from the point where the tunnel opened into the station itself and crept nearer to the edge inch by inch and took a quick look around. St Mary’s/Whitechapel Road had been closed almost eighty years
ago, and the platform had been separated from the rails by a large brick wall, so a rather large part of the station was blocked from view. But even if what she could discern of the station looked empty, it certainly didn’t feel that way.

She leant against the wall of the tunnel for a moment and considered her options. She was almost certain that she was walking into a trap, which at least made it more likely that she would actually find Tony here. Unfortunately in that case the ‘good Samaritan’ theory was moot. And unless she waited for Mickey to catch up, she was going into this alone, against an unknown number of opponents. Less than ideal conditions, but she had no choice.

Straightening her back, she sneaked towards the wrought-iron door in the wall that would lead her to the platform, careful not to make a sound. At least she would have the moment of surprise in her favour.

She hoped.

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Fortunately the door opened in the direction of the platform, not the rails. It took Rose some time to pick the lock, and she silently vowed to brush up her lock-picking skills soon. Even if it had been part of her Torchwood training, until now she had never had to use it, because if they had needed that sort of expertise there had always been team members who were better at it.

Eventually the lock gave way, and she opened the door a few millimetres without making a sound, which only served to increase her worries. Even if the station had served as a service entrance for the personnel of the London Underground, she doubted that they would have spent resources on the maintenance of a door they only seldom used.

But without surveillance technology or backup, she had no choice. She had to use the moment of surprise while she had it. She got up and closed her eyes for a moment, then unholstered her automatic and pushed against the door, so hard that it crashed against the inner wall, at the same time raising her weapon.

Unfortunately the scene unfolding in front of her was exactly like she had feared. Five or six men were standing on the platform, all wearing clothes that once had been of good quality but were now nothing more than rags barely covering gaunt bodies. Scavenged goods were piled up against the far wall. But then she discovered something that made her blood run cold.

A small human skull.

Rose shivered involuntarily. So the rumours were true.

“A visitor!” the man standing in front of the group of scavengers said in a mock-cheerful voice, interrupting her thoughts. “And from Torchwood, too!” he added, referring to her gear. “Looking for someone?”

He pulled at the leash he was holding and Tony stumbled to the front, the end of the leash around his waist, a blindfold covering his eyes.

Rose gritted her teeth, then collected herself, but before she could say anything, the man continued, “I had no idea they were sending girls barely old enough to buy their own booze on a rescue mission. That explains a lot. Next they’ll be recruiting girl scouts.”

The other men laughed.
You’ll notice I’m not carrying a tray with cookies,” Rose replied, trying to keep her voice even. “Let the boy go, and—"

“Rose!” Tony cried out, apparently having recognised her voice. “They—“

The rest of his sentence was cut off, when the man who had spoken before snatched Tony’s arm, pulled him closer and pressed a knife against his throat.

“Ah, so you know him,” the man said, considering her once more with cold eyes. “That makes things easier. Lay your weapon down or he dies.”

Rose was frozen to the spot, unable to move. The emptiness in his gaze made clear that he wouldn’t listen to reason. Intellectually, she knew that she couldn’t give in. If she did they’d be dead. But losing Tony would kill her, too. Now she knew what it must have cost the Doctor to tell the Daleks ‘No’ on the Gamestation.

The hand holding her automatic trembled slightly. And the man saw it. An ugly grin played around his lips and he increased the pressure of the knife against Tony’s throat. Tony whimpered, too afraid to even cry.

“You are one of those who are supposed to protect the planet?” the man said, disdain in his voice. “You’d better go home and play with your dolls, puppet. I know you won’t shoot. You just don’t have the guts for this. You wouldn’t survive a day down here.”

Suddenly his attention shifted slightly to a point over her left shoulder, but before Rose could react the muzzle of a gun bore into her side. Rose silently cursed herself. She should have listened to her instincts. There had been someone watching her. But what about Mickey? Had they got him too?

The newcomer slowly went around her, his weapon still trained at her, and took her automatic out of her hand.

“Thanks, babe,” he said with a dirty grin. “Nice gun, but I think we have better uses for it than you.”

He took a few steps away from her and put both weapons away, not even bothering to search her for another weapon. Rose tried to hide her relief at his mistake.

“Is she alone?” the leader of the group asked.

“Yeah.”

So the guy had been on outlook in one of the stations she had entered after Mickey had injured his ankle and therefore was unaware that she wasn’t as alone as he thought. Well, if Mickey had made it this far.

“So, what am I going to do with you?” the man mused. “I mean, I already know what I’m gonna do with the boy, but, well…”

“Can I have her, boss?” one of the other men asked, licking his lips. “It’s been too long since I’ve had a pretty girl…”

“You see, my men haven’t had any fun for some time, not since our last female company… left us.”

His eyes flickered, and Rose was fairly certain what he was implying.

She thought quickly. She could take a chance with her hidden weapon, but that would also put Tony
into even more danger. It would be easier with backup, and for that she needed Mickey. But with his injury he would be moving slowly, so she needed more time. She didn’t think she could talk them out of what they were planning, but maybe she could stall them long enough.

“Let the boy go,” she said.

“And why would we want to do that?” the leader of the group of scavengers said. “In case you hadn’t noticed, you are alone and unarmed.”

“I’ll do whatever you want if you let him go. Please!”

“I like it when they beg,” one of the other men threw in.

“Please! He’s just a boy. Let my brother go! I’ll do what you want, and I won’t fight it! Just let him go!” She didn’t have to fake the desperation in her voice.

“Your brother, hmm?” The leader eyed her speculatively. “That opens up lots of interesting possibilities. What am I going to do with that information?” He paused, pretending to be thinking. “But as promising as your offer is, we already have plans with the boy,” he said, licking his lips. “You see, we’ve run out of supplies, and now we’re hungry.”

Once again he grinned at her, and Rose thought she was going to be sick.

“Oh, what a feast this will be. Such tender flesh. I’m gonna kill him first, I think. That’s kind of me, isn’t it? I might even let you try a bite.”

A shiver ran down her spine. He was insane. And he was holding a knife to her brother’s throat. She couldn’t turn her gaze away from Tony’s terrified eyes. She silently begged for strength. She couldn’t lose him. Not like this.

She came to the conclusion that even being exterminated by a Dalek would be more humane than this. She knew what kind of death she would prefer.

She made a decision.

Time slowed down.

Rose drew the small blaster she had kept hidden in her combat gear and took aim, stilling completely, not even blinking. Then she pulled the trigger.

The bolt expanded from the muzzle, a tail of light in air suddenly as thick as water.

She could see it hit the leader in the chest, could hear the impact, saw him falling in slow-motion.

She moved her arm to the man next to him and took aim. He was guilty of the same crime. They all were. And the verdict was the same.

“Rose!”

Someone was calling her name. She ignored it, bending her finger, slowly.

“Rose! Don’t!” she heard again, faintly, over the blood roaring in her ears.

They deserved it. They had been part of this group and would have let their leader kill her little brother.
“Rose, they’re not worth it!”

Louder this time, harder to ignore, but she did it none the less. Just a little more pressure on the trigger, another breadth of a hair…

Whatever the man saw in her face, it caused him to exchange glances with his comrades. Then they stumbled backwards, in the direction of a tunnel, but she knew she could still get at least one of them…

“Rose!” Mickey screamed again, finally breaking the spell.

Time sped up.

With great effort Rose let go of the trigger, feeling sick. She had killed somebody. Again. And worse, she had wanted to kill him, all of them. She would have done it, if Mickey hadn’t stopped her. She lowered her arm, secured her weapon and released the breath she had been holding. Then she ran towards Tony and engulfed him in a tight embrace.

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Chapter Twenty-Three

Chapter Summary

And so it begins...

Jack closed the TARDIS door behind him and threw his coat over one of the coral struts in the console room.

“I’m back, honey!” he yelled.

A loud clatter from under the console and a string of curses in multiple alien languages followed his words.

Jack raised his eyes to the ceiling. “That bad?”

An affirmative hum was his answer.

He sighed. “Has he slept?”

This time the answer was decidedly negative, followed by something Jack couldn’t quite interpret, but sounded like a decidedly pissed-off time ship giving a certain Time Lord a piece of her mind.

“I heard that,” a muffled voice said from under the console.

“Good,” Jack gave back, even though he had no idea what the TARDIS had said. “Did he eat?”

“You know, I’m here as well,” the Doctor said somewhat acerbically.

“Yes, but since you’re apparently not really talkative at the moment, I’ve decided to ask someone who is more likely to give me an answer.”

“Oi!”

A new voice interrupted the impending argument. “Jack! Can you please tell that big space dumbo hiding under the console that he should stop whatever he is doing at the moment because the TARDIS refuses to give everyone back their hot water until he relents!”

Jack turned around and grinned at Donna, who was standing in the archway leading to the galley, glaring at the part of the console under which the Doctor was hiding.

“Donna! I didn’t expect to see you here. Didn’t you say you’d stay with your folks at least until next week, because you needed a break?”

She turned her attention towards him. “Yeah. I mean, walking fat? I still don’t get how they lost an entire planet, but there you go. And the next few trips were even worse. All I wanted were a few quiet days at home, but what did I get?” She sighed. “My mum managed to drive me up the wall in less than twenty-four hours. I stayed another two days, but that was only for Granddad’s sake. On Thursday I was ready to kill someone, so I came back. But if I’d known I’d end up in a war zone between an alien and a sentient time ship, I’d rather have signed up for another week with my mum.”
She once again stared angrily at the grating that was currently hiding the Doctor from her gaze.

“What do you think about a cup of coffee and you tell me what exactly is going on here?” he suggested in an attempt to calm Donna down.

“Tea would be great,” she said, still glaring in the general direction of the Doctor. “But without any hot water that's not gonna happen. We can’t even boil it because she’s hidden the coffee machine and every kettle, pot and pan on this ship. Yesterday I was finally fed up with cold sandwiches and had to order in to get something warm to eat. Do you have any idea how difficult it is to get a delivery service to deliver a meal to a normally empty alley?”

At this point Donna seemed ready to spit fire, and Jack decided that he needed to calm her down. Quickly.


“And why would I want to do that?” the Doctor asked acerbically.

“Because the TARDIS is going to shock you if you don’t.”

“Didn’t convince me the last six times.”

“…and is going to give us one kettle back if you do,” Jack continued as if the Doctor hadn’t interrupted him. He turned a megawatt smile at the ceiling. “Please?”

Even though the hum sounded decidedly grumpy, it was affirmative, which Jack considered at least a small success.

Ten minutes later everyone had gathered in the galley, and the tea was steeping. Jack and Donna were sitting at the table, the Doctor leaning against the counter, arms crossed, his face an expressionless mask.

Nobody had spoken since they had left the console room, and Jack was more and more feeling like a therapist who was supposed to be negotiating between an old arguing couple, without even knowing what exactly the problem was.

No time like the present, he thought.

“Anyone willing to tell me why the TARDIS decided to cut the hot water supply?” He stared at the Doctor intently, but didn’t really expect an answer from him. Unsurprisingly, the Doctor didn’t as much as blink an eye.

“I'd say because he didn’t stop trying to modify her circuits when she wanted him to,” Donna said, adding her glare to Jack’s.

Jack sighed. This was worse than pulling teeth.

“Assuming Donna is right, anything you’ve got to say about that, Doctor?”

Once again the Doctor chose to ignore his question, so Donna answered instead.

“Well, if I have to guess from him babbling about spacio-this and temporal-that when he was still speaking it’s because the TARDIS somehow can’t make a connection with Rose anymore.”

The Doctor glared at Donna, a thunderous expression on his face. “I don’t babble,” he said, spitting out the word as if it tasted like dishwater.
Jack laughed. “You do, on occasion. And since that was the part of Donna’s statement you chose to focus on, I guess she was right about the rest.”

The Doctor looked slightly uncomfortable, but eventually he relented. “There’s a chance that I can get the equipment we found on Xeriax to work.”

“But that’s good, isn’t it?” Donna said, a smile blossoming on her face.

Jack, however, was confused. “What’s that to do with the TARDIS and her connection with Rose?”

The Doctor looked at him as if he had asked an exceptionally stupid question, then grumbled something unintelligible.

“Oi!” Donna glared at him. “No calling us stupid. In any language.”

“You don’t even know what I said!” the Doctor protested.

“No, but I can guess, and apparently I was not far off!” Donna shot back, then added, softer, “Doctor, we just want to help. So, please, tell us what’s wrong.”

The Doctor sighed and finally took a seat at the table. “Before the Time War, holding up a portal long enough for Rose to come through would have been easy. Two or three Time Lords working together could have done it, just with their TARDISes working together, but now it’s a lot more complicated.”

“That’s where the equipment we, well, secured on Xeriax comes in,” Jack said.

The Doctor nodded. “I need a few additional parts and have to make a couple of adjustments, but under the right conditions and with enough energy, I can hold up a portal on my own. Well, maybe. And only if I can find a natural weakness in the walls between universes. But it’s not gonna work if I don’t align universes first.”

“What does that mean, ‘align universes’?” Donna asked. “Can’t you just, I dunno, cross over with the TARDIS, get her and come back?”

He shook his head. “It doesn’t work like that. Rose’s universe moves faster than this one, even if we don’t know why. When we first crashed there, it was the same year on Earth as in our universe, but then it began to move faster. When Canary Wharf happened, they were almost three years ahead, and the rate is increasing.”

“Does that mean Rose…?” Jack didn’t finish his question.

The Doctor looked him in the eyes and nodded slowly. “Yes.”

“Damn.”

“Yeah.”

“I still don’t get it,” Donna said. “Can’t you just travel in time to get to her when you are in the other universe?”

“Let me guess,” Jack threw in, understanding dawning, “Even if you can build a portal, it’s going to be extremely unstable if the universes are not in synch.”

“Exactly. And even if I could build a portal between universes that are not aligned, it would take up a tremendous amount of energy. And it’s not as if the TARDIS can just fuel up anywhere. At least
not while we’re in another universe.”

“Wait!” Donna said. “Are you telling me the TARDIS can refuel basically everywhere as long as we are in this universe? And we wouldn’t have needed to go to Cardiff for that pit stop that ultimately landed us on Skaro?”

The Doctor rolled his eyes. “And again she decides to focus on the least important part of what I said. Donna, I didn’t just want to go to Cardiff because I like the Roald Dahl Plass so much. I needed some information only Jack could give me. Using the rift for a fast refuel was just an additional plus. Otherwise we would have spent days just hanging in the Time Vortex, and honestly, I wasn’t certain I would survive your cooking that long.”

“Oi! At least I didn’t almost manage to kill us because I felt the need to show off my non-existent cooking skills on that fish soup planet.”

“Bouillabaisse. And I’ll have you know, I make a fantastic crème brûlée. Who was I to know the Bouillabaissians wouldn’t appreciate that?” The Doctor glared at her. “Anyway, the TARDIS can’t refuel in the other universe. Last time, I gave her a part of my life energy, but that isn’t nearly enough to travel in time there and to come back here if the universes are not in synch. Let alone that I currently don’t even know if time travel is even possible in Pete’s universe. Which brings us back to me having to align universes first.”

“Which means you need the reason why the universes are currently out of synch,” Jack concluded, suddenly realising what exactly was going on. “And Rose is the only one who can tell us. Only that she can’t.”

“Exactly. We always thought it had been the Cybermen, but that doesn’t explain why it is getting worse. I put myself into a trance as soon as you had left the TARDIS to increase the chance to meet Rose, but the TARDIS refuses to bridge universes.”

“Did she tell you why?” Donna asked.

The Doctor shook his head. “Just that it was too dangerous.”

“But that doesn’t make sense. Why now? What’s different compared to last time?” Jack asked.

“No idea. That’s what I’ve been trying to find out, but she won’t let me.”

The Doctor looked him in the eyes, and even though the Time Lord tried to hide it Jack could see that he feared for Rose. And apparently he was not the only one who had seen it.

“She’s fine, Doctor. If it was because of Rose, don’t you think the TARDIS would have told you?” Donna said. “It must be something else.”

The Time Lord avoided their eyes.

Jack sighed. “Doc, pissing off the TARDIS is not going to bring us nearer to an answer. Neither is brooding.”

“And what do you suggest we do?” the Doctor asked acridly.

Jack shrugged, then grinned. “What we always do. See the universe and find trouble on the way. And maybe we’ll even find out what is going on here.” He paused, suddenly thoughtful. “Because this is not the only unusual thing that happened in the last couple of weeks.”
“What do you mean?”

“I did some catching up with my Torchwood team, and they told me that apparently some genius boy introduced a device that would reduce carbon dioxide emissions to zero.”

The Doctor looked up. “That’s way too early.”

“My thoughts exactly, and apparently the Prime Minister thought the same. She said it was just too good to be true, even though several experts advised her to approve it. Turned out it was a Sontaran plot to conquer the Earth, and when they threatened to invade, she let the military destroy one of their ships with a weapon they had found in an alien space ship, years ago. The rest of the invasion fleet apparently got the message and retreated quickly.”

“Sontarans? On Earth? But normally they are so involved in their war with the Rutans that they completely ignore the rest of the universe.”

“Apparently they were losing the war and wanted to use Earth as cloning world.”

“Like the Adipose?” Donna asked. “Did they lose their breeding planet as well?”

“No idea,” Jack said. “But you have to admit that it’s weird.”

“Yeah, like the thing with the disappearing bees,” Donna added.

“Bees? What bees?” the Doctor asked.

“Just something granddad said. The bees are disappearing.”

“Bees. Disappearing.”

“Yeah. People think it’s air pollution. Or maybe mobile phone signals.”

The Doctor rubbed his cheek unconsciously. “Could be they’re going home.”

“Are you saying the bees are aliens?”

“Some of them. But that doesn’t make sense. Sontar and Melissa Majoria are basically on opposite sides of the universe. What do they have in common?”

“And don’t forget the Adipose breeding planet,” Jack threw in.

“Melissa Majoria, Sontar, Adipose 3,” the Doctor mused. “Still doesn’t make sense.”

“They’ve got an S, an A and an O,” Donna said, apropos of nothing.

“What do you mean?”

“Their names. They’ve got an S, an A and an O.”

“Donna, we’re trying to find out what’s going on here, not trying to win a spelling contest.”

“Well, you asked what those planets had in common. I’m just trying to help.”

“Other ideas?” the Doctor asked, looking at Jack who simply shook his head.

“Oh well, in that case…” The Doctor jumped up, suddenly grinning manically. “Let’s try the randomizer.”
“What’s the randomizer?” Jack asked.

“What it says on the tin: it sends the TARDIS to a random point in space and time.”

“And how is that different from what happens when you’re the designated driver?”

“Oi!”

~o~o~o~

“All of us suffered from the Nameless. All of us lost family and friends. And all of us are needed to rebuild the country. So let’s finally abolish the zones that artificially divide a population that needs to stand as one against.”

Rose Tyler switched off the television. Once again Harriet Jones had tried to persuade people to finally get rid of the zone system. She was right, of course, but she would never convince enough MPs to join her cause. None of them had any idea what it meant to be treated as a second-class citizen, to be the last person being considered for a flat or a job, not having access to many areas of London and other major cities without having to pass through several checkpoints, being subjected to frequent curfews without a reason. Even though Rose had grown up on a council estate and people had looked down at her because of that, that wasn’t nearly the same, and she hoped that Harriet Jones would finally succeed. However, most MPs wanted to keep things as they were, fearing for their safety. They didn’t seem understand that what they saw as a means against social unrest would sooner or later turn into the opposite, that the people in the zones would rise against those who saw them as less worthy.

Rose sighed. People were mourning the loved ones that had been abducted by the Nameless or been killed during the siege. The government and most executive authorities had been mostly extinguished, as well as the civil service, and once again the planet had to rebuild everything from scratch, much like after the Cyberwar. And both government and parliament had decided to ignore a large part of the population, people who maybe could make a difference, who maybe would even fight for a country that treated them equally.

She grabbed a sponge and furiously scrubbed the tiles in the bathroom, silently cursing Terrence Gold for the umpteenth time. Her boss had forced her to take a few days off, telling her to finally make use of the endless hours of overtime she had accumulated over the last few months.

“If I see you here before Monday morning, I’ll tell Pete to transfer you to Finance,” he had said.

“But-“

“No buts. That’s an order. You need rest. You almost botched your last assignment because you were completely sleep-deprived, Rose. I appreciate your dedication to your job, but in this condition you’re a danger to your teammates. So either you take the rest of the week off, or else you work for Matt next week.”

Rose had grumbled, but since Terrence never made empty threats and working for Matthew Powell was probably even further down on her list of favourite tasks than cleaning the toilet, she had simply nodded and gone home. Even though there had been no consequences to her trip in the tunnels, she was certain that Terrence had seen right through their cover story and knew that she had ignored a direct order. He might have tolerated it once, because of Tony, but she knew him well enough to know that he wouldn’t do it again.

That had been two days ago. Until now she had spent the time cleaning her flat, but removing non-
existent spots from the tiles was her last task, then every chore was done, even those she tended to avoid until she couldn’t put them off any longer.

They still didn’t know what had happened. One day two months ago, the ships had been there, hanging in the sky like they had for far too many months, then the Nameless were suddenly gone, the entire armada vanished within minutes. As soon as the scans had confirmed that the sky was empty again the consequences had hit her full force. For months she had refused to believe that her mum was dead, but the hostile armada gone meant that they had lost every chance to find out what had happened to her and all the other abductees. And since neither humans nor the few aliens Torchwood had diplomatic relations with had ever found out who the Nameless were, they had a snowflake’s chance in hell to rescue their people. Which meant that even if Jackie was still alive, she might as well have died the moment she was transmatted.

Shortly after Tony’s little detour into the tunnels Pete and she had told him that Jackie had been abducted by the Nameless. After the aliens had vanished and they had finally been able to leave Torchwood Tower, the little boy had asked if now his mum would come back. Even though Pete had expected the question, he had still struggled when he explained to Tony what the aliens being gone meant for Jackie. Tony had nodded, accepting Pete’s explanation that his mum was still lost and would most likely never come back, but that there was a teeny-weeny chance that they would see her again. Every now and then he asked if his mum would come back today, but he was a child: in play he could forget everything around him. To tell the truth, Tony seemed to be coping a lot better than she did.

Rose wished she had his ability to forget reality. Whenever she had too much time on her hands, the truth hit her with a sledgehammer: Her mum was gone, and the chance of her coming back was only infinitesimally better than a snowflake’s chance in hell. Then the memories came, not only of her mum and the chance to warn her she had missed, but also of all those things she had seen and done during the siege, worst of all killing the man who had abducted Tony.

She had to admit that Terrence was right. She was sleep-deprived and exhausted to the bone. But she couldn’t get herself to rest. Whenever she did, whenever she stopped, her thoughts began to wander. Now she understood why the Doctor never stood still. So she had taken a leaf from his book and thrown herself into work. Nobody had questioned her, because Torchwood was short on personnel, especially on field agents. Not only because many of her colleagues had lost their lives, but because others had quit service afterwards. Rose had gladly taken the opportunity, trying to exhaust herself as much as possible, so she would at least be able to sleep for a few short hours.

To make things worse, the dreams had stopped. She hoped that it was because she slept so little, but she feared something had happened to the Doctor, which was all too possible, given the life he led.

Her mobile rang, interrupting her thoughts, and she dropped the sponge in the sink, diving for her handbag to find the device before it went to voicemail.

“Tyler.”

“Pete has called everyone in for a meeting. Something happened. He wants you here yesterday,” she heard Jake’s voice say. He sounded worried, which put her on alert immediately.

“Okay. Give me thirty.”

Twenty-seven minutes later Rose slid into the chair between Mickey and Jake in a conference room in Torchwood Tower.

“Any idea what’s going on?”
Jake shook his head. “No. Pete just gave me a list of people to call. But to tell the truth, I’ve never seen him look so worried.”

“Yeah, and if possible, Stephanie McDonnal looked even worse,” Mickey threw in. “Must be something big.”

Another five minutes later, Pete entered the room, Stephanie McDonnal, the head of astronomical research, at his side. He took a seat, then looked at the Directors and the few field agents on the table.

“We have a situation. The stars are going out,” he said without preamble.

“What does that mean? How can the stars go out?” Matthew Powell asked before Pete could continue, and even though Rose thoroughly disliked him, his question voiced her thoughts exactly.

“We don’t know,” Stephanie McDonnal said. “All we know is that the stars are going out. Literally. It’s like they’re just vanishing from the sky. One minute they’re there, the next they’re gone, as if they never existed, along with each and every planet circling them. And there’s absolutely nothing that would indicate a supernova or even them being sucked into a black hole.” She sounded as if she was about to panic, completely unlike the solemn, collected persona she normally presented. “That’s not all. The speed is increasing. Even the rate of increase is increasing. If it continues like this the general public will notice in less than three months.”

Pete took up the briefing again, and from the look in his face Rose knew he was about to deliver the really bad news. “According to our calculations, the phenomenon will reach the Solar System in less than seven months.”

“Are you sure that this isn’t just some sort of visual trick?” Terrence Gold asked.

“No,” Stephanie said. “We have conclusive evidence from three earthbound telescopes and Hubble. Also, the Corrivex have reported that they’re witnessing the same phenomenon.”

“Do we know where and when it started?” Rose asked.

“The Corrivex first noticed it six months ago in the Theta sector, in an area they refer to as Firesnake’s Blast, from where it spread in all directions. Apparently they have several allies in the region who asked for their help, but they were too late. The systems of their allies had already been swallowed by the darkness. As a result, their system was flooded with refugees. The Corrivex sent out a couple of space probes and two scout ships when the first refugees appeared in their system. Whenever one of them neared the coordinates of a system that should have been there but wasn’t, they lost contact. Neither the space probes nor the scout ships came back.”

“Is the phenomenon limited to a certain part of space?” Matthew Powell wanted to know.

“Unfortunately not. It’s spreading into every quadrant.”

“Any ideas what’s causing it?”

Stephanie shook her head. “None. Our best experts came up with absolutely nothing. It just doesn’t make sense. We thought it was completely impossible. Neither we nor the Corrivex or their allies have any idea what’s going on, let alone how to stop it. Which means...” She trailed off and looked at Pete.

“Which means that even though we don’t know what exactly will happen, we know that we, that this planet will cease to exist in less than seven months.” Pete paused. “However, there is still one thing we can do, but only if the directors are all in agreement.” He paused for a moment, then
continued, “The last time we crossed in another universe, we were warned that both our and the other universe would collapse if we ever tried to weaken the walls again.”

Rose looked at Pete, not even daring to breathe. Was he really going to suggest what she thought he would? Would he really redirect the entire resources of Torchwood into a dimension crossing project, to achieve what she had tried alone, during so many lonely nights in her hideout in the archives before the Nameless had invaded the planet? She tried to read his expression, but to no avail. Her thoughts raced, and she almost missed Pete’s next words.

“Our entire universe is at stake. Our only chance is to once more cross into that other universe and find the one person that might be able to help us.” He paused again, and this time he looked directly at Rose. “The Doctor.”

Murmurs rose up, but Pete raised a hand and they died down. “It wasn’t easy the last time, and this time it’s going to be even more difficult, because last time the walls between universes had already been weakened on the other side. And there’s no guarantee that we will be able to reach the other universe. No guarantee that we will be able to find the Doctor-”

“No guarantee we won’t destroy the entire universe in the process,” Matthew Powell mumbled.

“-and no guarantee that he will be able to help us,” Pete continued, ignoring the comment. “The only certainty is that we will die, all of us, everyone we love, if we don’t act now. So, your votes, please.”

He paused for a moment, and the directors exchanged uncomfortable looks. Rose glanced at Pete, then at the others. Even if she would give almost anything to get back to her original universe, she wouldn’t want to make that particular vote right now, in the knowledge that their actions might indeed cause what they were trying to prevent.

“Those against?” Pete asked. No hand rose up.

“Those in favour?” One after another the directors raised their hands, and even though Matthew Powell looked as if he was going to spit fire, his hand rose up as well.

“Then let’s start looking for a way to the Doctor.”

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He was losing it. Totally losing it. Not because of the entity that was currently trying to consume him, that was more like a minor nuisance. The bunch of people currently discussing whether to throw him out of the bus into the lethal Xtonic sunlight of Midnight was a bit more serious. But what was really getting to him was Rose.

Ever since Rose had been trapped in Pete’s World, he had turned to show her something or reached for her hand before he had remembered that she wasn’t there. No tongue-in-cheek smiles, no comforting hugs, no hand to hold. Only Jack working beside him, Donna bullying him into eating and sleeping and travelling, and the dreams that linked Rose and him across the void had stopped him from going mad, the way he had been before he had met Rose.

But then the dreams had stopped, and now he was seeing her everywhere. He caught glimpses of her in alien markets or on the TARDIS monitor, but whenever he ran to catch her or took a closer look at the screen she was gone. And now he had even briefly seen her image on a screen in this damned bus, just out of the corner of his eyes, and once again she had been wearing the same blue leather jacket she always did, a jacket he had never seen her in before.

But even if he was going mad, and given his track record he couldn’t be entirely sure that he wasn’t,
he was fairly certain that something was going on, and that it had something to do with all those lost planets. And if it was the last thing he did, he would find out what it was and who was behind it, and then it would stop.
Chapter Twenty-Four

The end credits of the movie they’d been watching rolled, and Jake switched off the telly in the small ready room they had claimed as theirs. Watching a movie together had become a weekly ritual for Rose, Mickey, and Jake since Torchwood had started looking for a way to the Doctor.

“Man, I wish we could go to the pub for an evening. I could go up the wall sometimes, being barracked in Torchwood Tower,” Mickey said, reaching for the bottle of beer on the table. “I get that we can’t afford the general public finding out about the stars going out, but this is getting ridiculous.”

Jake nodded. “I know what you mean. And I even get out sometimes.”

Rose took a sip of wine. “And I’m allowed to go out only because otherwise the rags would start digging around. I’ve never liked going to all those charity events as it was, but now I’m nothing more than an empty-headed clothes rack who is supposed to distract people from the impending destruction of the universe.”

“But you and Mickey get to make all these jumps to the other universe. I’m more like an errand boy running around in the landscape, trying to persuade hobby astronomers to keep the information about the phenomenon to themselves.”

“After that universe with the dinosaurs, I’d switch positions with you immediately, but they need someone who can identify the right universe really fast. At least that’s what Pete said when he sold the assignment to us.”

“Unfortunately he was wrong,” Rose said. “You’d think we’d end up in universes that are mostly like our original one or this one, but that’s not the case. Apparently their position in the multiverse doesn’t have anything to do with the time the universes separated. Come to think of it, we should have realised this ages ago. This universe diverged from our original one in 1879, or maybe even earlier. Since then there have been numerous pivotal points in our history that would have caused the creation of a new universe, and yet we ended up here when the TARDIS crashed.”

“But you’re still the ones who happen to hit the right universe most of the time,” Jake said.

Mickey shrugged. “Maybe that’s just because we are more or less certain whether we are in the right universe or not while the others are just making an educated guess. And Rose is much better at it than I am.”

Rose refilled her glass, with water this time. “I guess it helps that we are originally from the universe we are trying to get to,” she said.

“And the connection you share with the TARDIS,” Jake added, looking at her.

“And that. But we’re still nowhere near getting to the Doctor. There’ve been a couple of times when I was almost certain that I had finally found him, but before I could get near him he was gone again.” She sighed. “At least we’re beyond that ‘calling the Doctor’ phase. I always felt like a blind and deaf person shouting in the dark, hoping someone would hear. I don’t think it worked. I mean, what are the odds of reaching a monitor in the vicinity of the Doctor and him looking at it during the few seconds we could establish a connection?”

“But your ideas about the void helped a lot,” Mickey said. “I’d never have thought you’d find out that much when I helped you with the plans of the dimension jumpers.”
“Most of the time I was just guessing,” Rose gave back evasively. After the Bad Wolf Event she had told Jake and Mickey about her connection with the TARDIS, but had kept the bond and the dreams to herself. Since the dreams had stopped before all of this had started, what would have been the point anyway? As it was, there was no chance to discuss with the Doctor any of the theories both she and the Torchwood scientists had developed.

It had taken them almost three months to get their dimension-crossing device to function properly, and they still didn’t know why it suddenly worked. One day they hadn’t gotten any readings at all and had already been sure that they had to go back to the drawing board, but the next day the little monitor had suddenly lit up.

Rose theorised that what was affecting this universe was also affecting the others and the void, that it would eventually destroy the fabric of reality. But until then the same phenomenon that was threatening them was their only chance to reach the one person that might be able to help.

She yawned and got up. “I’m heading to bed, and you should do the same, Mick. We’re jumping first thing in the morning, and we really should catch some sleep.”

Mickey gave her a mock salute. “Yes, Ma’am.”

Rose, already at the door, laughed, albeit a bit forced, then left the room. Outside, her shoulders slumped briefly. It was getting harder and harder to maintain a positive attitude. It was true, she needed sleep, but her exhaustion ran deeper than that. The whole situation was getting to her. Torchwood Tower, the place that had protected them against the Nameless and had almost felt like home back then, had begun to feel like a prison only weeks after the dimension-crossing project had started, and the short times during which she was allowed to leave headquarters brought only a little reprieve. She almost felt like Cinderella: eventually her carriage would turn into a pumpkin and she would switch the gowns Pete’s PR assistant had selected for Torchwood gear and blue leather jacket again.

And then there were the jumps. In the beginning there had been eight teams, each consisting of two persons. Every team had had at least one member that had been to their original universe before, during the battle of Canary Wharf. But soon they had faced the first losses, due to both hostile environment and faulty equipment. Despite their best efforts, their scientists simply couldn’t guarantee where they would land. Mickey had only barely survived when he had landed in a universe where Earth was dominated by lizard-like creatures, which he referred to as dinosaurs, while his partner had been killed. Rose’s partner had requested a transfer after they had been stranded on an alien planet for three days, until they had been able to repair their return button. Landing on another planet should have been impossible, according to the scientists, yet it had happened. Rose could have bet that her connection with the TARDIS was responsible for that. And even though she seemed to hit the right universe rather constantly, there had been no sign of the Doctor so far.

Tomorrow would be the first time she’d jump with Mickey, since both of them currently didn’t have partners.

But until then, she needed to sleep. And maybe she would dream. The thought was unexpected, but even though she was almost certain it wouldn’t happen she couldn’t stop herself from hoping.

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The Doctor was typing furiously on the keyboard when his companions finally returned to the TARDIS. He had decided against telling Donna and Jack what had happened on the bus tour. From what he could tell at the moment, the incident itself didn’t have anything to do with whatever was
going on here. Slowly but steadily the entire situation was getting to him. He was seeing images of Rose everywhere, including the monitor on the bus, and he didn’t know what was happening — just that it was not good. With every passing minute he was more and more convinced that it had something to do with the lost planets. He had entered the data into the TARDIS computer, but it didn’t add up. Part of the puzzle was still missing.

“That massage was wonderful,” Donna commented upon entering. “I haven’t been this relaxed in years.”

“The masseur wasn’t bad either,” Jack added, grinning. “Just imagine what else he could do with four hands.”

“Mind out of the gutter, cowboy!” Donna gave back, laughing.

“Who said my mind was in the gutter? Could have been yours! And don’t tell me you didn’t eye his bum.” He winked at Donna.

“Because your mind is almost never anywhere else, Jack,” the Doctor interrupted their banter, shooting him a glare. “We don’t have time for this.”

“Time machine, remember?” Jack sing-songed. “What could be that important that we can’t even-“

Apparently Donna was more perceptive. “What’s wrong, Doctor?” she asked, interrupting Jack.

“I don’t know,” he said in a thinly veiled attempt to discourage her from asking more questions he didn’t particularly want to answer.

He should have known his brisk behaviour wouldn’t stop Jack from whatever he thought he needed to say.

“Right. And because you don’t know you decide to lash out at us just because we were having fun. You were the one who decided to use the randomizer, and it was your ship that brought us here. So excuse us if we decided to enjoy our time here,” Jack said, slowly getting angry.

The Doctor took a deep breath, desperately trying to stop himself from lashing out again and failing. “Jack...” he began, unable to keep a threatening undertone out of his voice, which put the former time agent on alert immediately.

Once again Donna tried to defuse the situation. “What happened?” she rephrased her earlier question, before Jack could do more than open his mouth.

“Nothing.”

“Doesn’t look like nothing to me,” she said, calmly. “Doctor, we can help only if you tell us what’s going on.”

He stared at his hands for a long moment, but without actually seeing anything, then relented. “I have no idea what’s going on, but it has something to do with all those planets.”

“What planets?” Donna asked, confused.

“All those lost planets, remember? First the Adipose breeding planet, then the bees disappearing. It has been following us around, but we kept missing it, and even when you mentioned that the Sontarans might have lost their planet as well, I didn’t realise that something was going on until someone told me about the Lost Moon of Poosh. Four planets can’t be a coincidence. But something
still doesn’t add up, and I don’t know what it is.”

He decided against mentioning that he was seeing Rose. Even if he was almost certain that his companions already thought he was insane, he didn’t need to fortify them in their belief.

“And what do we do now?”

“We’re gonna visit London,” he declared.


“Because whenever something nefarious is going on in the universe it for some reason affects Earth, one way or the other.”

“But why London? I don’t mind seeing Granddad again, but lately we’ve been to Cardiff if we were on Earth.”

“Because I lost Rose there,” he said, his voice almost too low to be heard. Even though it was not completely unlikely that he had finally gone ‘round the bend, he refused to believe that the images of Rose were nothing but a figment of his imagination. And if they weren’t, if she was really coming back, then he figured she would return to where all of this had begun. And even though he tried to tell himself that he was just fooling himself, he couldn’t completely ignore the tiny spark of hope that had ignited in his hearts.

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The technician once more verified the readings on his monitor. “Are you ready?”

“Equipment fully functional, ready to go,” Rose confirmed, after having checked her weapon one last time.

Mickey nodded. “Same here.”

“Starting the countdown. Three... Two... One... Go!”

The technician pressed a button, and the control room around them vanished, only to be replaced by a sparsely populated street on a sunny morning.

For a moment, Rose just stood there, trying to get over the dizziness that came with every jump, then she looked around, taking in the small houses lining the street.

“What do you think, Mick? Right universe?”

“Looks like it. But that’s what I thought before the dinosaurs appeared.”

“I’d say some reconnaissance is in order, then.” She looked up and down the street, then pointed in the direction where she could see the tower of a church. “That way?”

“Fine with me,” Mickey gave back.

They had made less than ten steps down the street when suddenly a tremor started below their feet and grew stronger by the second.

“Earthquake?” Mickey asked, trying to keep his footing.

“No, look! That’s no ordinary earthquake!” Rose pointed at the sky that had gone dark all of a
sudden. For a seemingly endless moment that couldn’t have lasted for more than a few seconds, nothing else happened. Then one by one several planets appeared above their heads.

Two seconds later the screaming started.

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The Doctor flipped the last lever and the TARDIS left the time vortex.

Jack opened the door, but instead of leaving the ship he stopped dead in his tracks.

“Jack? Something wrong?”

“Doctor, are you sure you had the right coordinates? Because this certainly isn’t London.”

It took him four long steps, then he was standing next to Jack. Where there should have been a crowded street or maybe a small alley, depending on the mood his time ship was in, there were only rocks and dust, floating in space.

Too late. Not good enough. The litany that had been his constant companion during those last battles of the Time War reverberated in his mind once more. But not this time, he decided, balling his fists. He would find whoever was responsible for this, and then it would stop.

“Damn! And my team is out there on their own,” Jack said, coming to the same conclusion upon seeing his reaction. “What now?”

“What’s wrong?” Donna asked.

“The Earth is gone,” Jack gave back, saving the Doctor the answer.

“What do you mean, gone...?” Donna stared outside, then looked at them in shock. “Does that mean it was...” She gulped and continued, “Does that mean it was destroyed?”

The Doctor shook his head. “There’s not enough debris for that.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. It’s just... gone.”

“But if Earth is gone... They’ve lost the sun... And what about my Mum? And Granddad? Are they dead?”

He didn’t answer.

“Doctor? Are they dead? Are they dead?!”

The urgency in her voice spurred him into action. He raced back to the console to check the monitors but came up with nothing.

He looked at Donna. “I’ve never seen anything like this before. It should be impossible. You can move a planet, but normally that would leave traces. But here... Just nothing.”

“So, what now?” Jack repeated his earlier question.

He quickly came to a conclusion. And even though he didn’t like it, he knew they had no choice.
“We need the Shadow Proclamation.”

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“So, what do we know?” Owen Harper asked. “Tosh?”

The Torchwood scientist looked up from her workstation. “Earth has changed its astronomical position. I don’t know how that’s even possible. But whoever did this, they’ve created an artificial atmospheric shell around the planet, designed to keep the air and the heat in. And apparently it also includes the geostationary satellites.”

“Well, at least they want us alive,” Ianto Jones threw in. “That’s a plus.”

“There’s more data coming in from the military,” Tosh said. “I’m adding it to what we know. Give me a minute.” She typed furiously on her keyboard, and the data on the screen began to change quickly.

“That can’t be true,” Ianto said, when suddenly a 3D representation of Earth appeared on the monitor. “There are... twenty-six planets around us.”

“Which means it’s not just us,” Gwen concluded. “Wait, what’s that?” She pointed at a red spot on the screen that had just started to flash.

“Looks like an artificial structure,” Owen said. “Some sort of space station, maybe.”

“Let me integrate the data streams from the UNIT satellites,” Tosh said, her hands flying over the keyboard, and the picture changed again.

“There is movement,” Ianto realised. “Can you enhance that sector, Tosh?”

“Sure.”

“Let me see.” Owen looked at the monitor. “About two hundred objects, heading towards Earth. Anything from UNIT, Tosh?”

“They’ve called a Code Red. Apart from that, they know as much as we do.”

“Three thousand miles and closing,” Gwen said.

“Something from the British government?”

“The PM has activated the emergency protocol. People are asked to seek shelter and stay inside. The armed forces are in battle positions. But...”

Owen nodded. “They won’t stand a chance,” he finished her sentence. “Gwen?”

“Fifteen-hundred miles and accelerating. They’re almost here. Whoever they are.”

“Wait, there’s something on the B band,” Tosh said.

“Put it on the speakers,” Owen ordered, and a distorted mechanical voice filled the room.

“Exterminate!”

~o~o~o~
“What’s the Shadow Proclamation when it’s at home?” Donna asked Jack, desperately holding on to the console, while the Doctor tried to pilot a violently shaking TARDIS to their destination.

“They’re like an outer space police force, and they have issued rules for contact with other species.”

“So basically Interpol with a bit of UN thrown in.”

“Yeah.” Jack sounded a lot less enthusiastic than she had become used to.

“What’s wrong, Jack?”

“They might have a warrant for me,” he said eventually. “I was a con man before I met the Doctor.”

“No, they don’t,” the Doctor threw in. “I made a few, well, corrections to their database, just before we went to Japan, before the Gamestation.” He pressed another button, and the shaking grew worse, if possible.

“You made...? But why?” Jack was astonished.

“Didn’t want to have a couple of Judoon hot on my heels all the time,” the Doctor gave back lightly, but from his expression Donna could tell that wasn’t the real reason.

She gripped the console harder and decided to change the topic. “But why is the TARDIS shaking like that? I mean, normally only his landings are that bad.”

“Because we’re flying through real space at the moment.”

“Jack’s right,” the Doctor said, flipping a lever, and their flight path finally stabilised. “The shaking was a shock wave hitting us. Which means Earth is not the only planet that’s been relocated.”

“But why can’t it have been the shock wave from Earth?” Donna asked.

“Because we were in the time vortex when Earth was moved.” The Doctor flipped another lever and the rotor stopped.

“Let’s go.” He opened the TARDIS doors, only to be greeted by two guards that looked a lot like rhinoceroses standing upright.

"The aliens are Judoon,” Jack told Donna. “They are mercenaries, and the Shadow Proclamation is known to employ them as police force. Even though they are not stupid, you can’t argue with them when they’re on a mission. It’s a waste of breath.”

One of the Judoon said something Donna couldn’t understand.

“Why isn’t the TARDIS translating?” Donna asked, when the Doctor answered in completely unintelligible syllables.

Jack shrugged. “No idea.”

Eventually the discussion between the Doctor and the Judoon ended, and the guards lowered their guns.

~o~o~o~

So the Shadow Architect thought he was just a myth, which was just as well. During the Time War he had asked the Shadow Proclamation for help against the Daleks, and even though they had
acknowledged that the Daleks had to be defeated for the sake of the universe, they hadn’t understood that the Time War was more than just an event in linear time. So they had tried to seize his TARDIS and force him to join their forces. Suffice to say they hadn’t exactly parted on the best terms. Luckily the end of the Time War had erased both the information about Time Lords and his visit from the collective knowledge of the Shadow Proclamation, or else he would have found himself in a holding cell faster than he could say Raxacoricofallapatorius.

“Yes, well, as soon as you’re done with your lesson on myths, maybe we could get back to the point. We’ve got a missing planet. Maybe even more.”

“Then, you’re not as wise as the stories would say. The picture is far bigger than you imagine. The whole universe is in outrage, Doctor - twenty-four worlds have been taken from the sky.”

“And he’s telling me I keep missing the big picture,” Donna said to no one in particular.

“Twenty-four?” the Doctor asked, taken by surprise. “Which ones?”

The Shadow Architect pressed a few buttons on a computer. “Look for yourself.”

“Calufrax Major, Jahoo, Woman Wept,” the Doctor cited the names on the screen, his face showing a faraway look for a moment. “Woman Wept,” he repeated softly, then continued, “Clom, Sol Three — wonder who reported that before we did —, Sontar — you were right about that one, Donna —, Shallacatop... It doesn’t make sense.”

“All different sizes, level one to level five planets, some even unpopulated, and no connection,” the Shadow Architect said.

“Maybe if we put it into 3D...” The Doctor typed a few commands, and a hologram filled the room. “Still doesn’t make sense.”

“What about the Adipose breeding planet?” Donna asked.

“Who is the female?” the Shadow Architect asked, arching her eyebrows in contempt.

“Donna Noble. A Human Being who wants her planet back.”

“And every bit as important as everyone else on this space station,” the Doctor declared. “And she’s right. What about Adipose Three? It’s not on the list.”

“Adipose Three is a cold case. It vanished almost a decade ago. It can’t possibly be related to this,” the Shadow Architect said condescendingly.

For a moment silence filled the room.

Until now Jack had kept a surprisingly low profile despite knowing the warrants on his head didn’t exist anymore. But now he straightened and said, “Doc, I’ve just remembered. When I was in Pompeii, ages ago, I overheard someone saying that Pyrovillia was lost.”

“That’s it!” The Doctor exclaimed. “The planets are not just taken out of space, they’re also taken out of time! So, if we add Adipose Three... and Pyrovillia... And of course the Lost Moon of Poosh...”

“Don’t tell me, another cold case,” Donna said to the Judoon next to her who had just made an unintelligible noise.
A few commands later three more planets appeared in the hologram. For a couple of seconds nothing happened, then suddenly the planets changed their positions.

“What did you do?” the Shadow Architect asked reproachfully.


“Who could design such a thing?”

“No idea. Even if...”

“If what, Doctor?”

“Someone tried to move a planet before, but... Nah, impossible.” He hoped.

~o~o~o~

A flying saucer appeared in the sky, firing missiles at a target beyond Rose's line of view, and she and Mickey ducked instinctively.

“Is that...” Mickey said, his voice trailing off.

Rose nodded. “Daleks.” She tried to keep her voice from wavering, but failed. Ever since the bunker in Utah, Daleks filled her with dread, and that certainly hadn’t been improved by the events on the Gamestation and the battle of Canary Wharf.

She took a deep breath, trying to get her fear under control. “And I guess it also answers the question whether we are in the right universe or not. I just didn’t think we’d end up in a war zone. Do you want to go back and try again, Mick?”

“I guess if there are Daleks, the Doctor can’t be far away. This might be our best shot at finding him.” He looked at Rose. “I’m game if you are.”

“Okay, then let’s take cover and find out what exactly is going on here. Over there looks good to me.” She pointed at a garden shed with two dustbins next to it. “It should be basically invisible from above, thanks to the huge trees in the garden.”

The two of them dashed over the street and tried the door of the shed. The small hut was unlocked, and they slipped inside, closing the door behind them.

Mickey opened his backpack, pulling out a small computer. “Maybe I can hack into the military radio traffic and their data transmissions. What year do you think it is?”

“I dunno. 2008 or 2009 maybe. Why?”

“Because if we’re lucky, the Torchwood here is using the same protocols we did back then. If I can remember the correct one...” He typed a few commands. “This might take a while.”

“Maybe I can narrow it down.” Rose slipped out of the shed again and opened one of the dustbins. She rummaged until she had found what she was looking for, then returned inside. “According to the newspaper I found, it’s June 2009. Does that help?”

“Yeah. Give me a minute.” He made a few adjustments to the code, then pressed a button. “We’re in. Let’s see. This universe’s Torchwood should have access to the military reports.” He clicked on an icon, and a new window opened on the small monitor.
Rose needed a few seconds to make sense of the numerous reports on the screen. “Air forces in Europe and North America are under massive attack, retreating in North Africa. Daleks have landed in Japan,” she summarised the information.

“Look, Harriet Jones is still the PM, but they seem to have lost contact to her,” Mickey said, pointing at a news alert that had just popped up on the screen.

“Anything from this universe’s Torchwood?”

He switched to another window. “There’s just the Cardiff branch, and they’re, like, four people, a pteranodon, and a computer.”

“A pteranodon?” she asked, astonished, then shook her head. “Never mind. Any sign of the Doctor?”

Mickey shook his head. “Nothing. Too bad your superphone has been destroyed. You could just have called him.”

“Yeah. But if it hadn’t deflected the blow during that last attack in the sewers, I’d probably be dead.”

For a few moments Mickey was silent. “And your connection with the TARDIS? Can’t you use that?”

Rose sighed. “I’ve tried, Mick. Whenever I thought I was in the right universe I’ve tried to contact the TARDIS. But apparently I’m not telepathic enough to establish a connection myself.” Of course she had tried to contact the Doctor as well, but that hadn’t worked either, so telling Mickey about it was moot anyway.

“And what do we do now?”

“I’d say, let’s take another hour to collect more information, then organise some transport and get to the nearest military base. Maybe we can do something to help.”
I disliked so many things about The Stolen Earth/Journey's End, I don't even know where to begin. So I rewrote it.

“It’s impossible. You can’t move a planet without leaving a trace,” the Doctor said for the third or fourth time, staring at the monitor as if willing it to present a solution.

“But you said there wasn’t one,” Jack threw in.

“Maybe we’ve overlooked something.” He turned to his companions. “When you were on Earth, before we went to Midnight, did you notice something? Something unusual, like electrical storms or patterns in the sky…”

“No idea,” Jack said.

“Nothing. Just that thing with the bees,” Donna said. “And you said they were going home.”

For a moment the Doctor just stared at her. “But that’s it!”

“Disappearing bees? How is that of significance?” The Shadow Architect asked.

The Doctor ignored her, in favour of checking something on the computer. “Melissa Majoria was reported missing a couple of weeks ago. And if the migrant bees felt something, and decided to return to their home planet…” He paused, thinking. “Migrant bees. The Tandocca Scale.”

“Do you have any idea what he’s talking about?” Donna asked Jack, who shook his head.

The Doctor sighed and mumbled something under his breath, then elaborated, “The Tandocca Scale is a category of wavelengths migrant bees use to send carrier signals, so they can find their way back home. It’s almost impossible to detect if you’re not looking for it. So, if whoever is responsible for this tried to use that as an advantage, to hide what they were doing… Maybe the bees just misunderstood what the signal was saying, that it was designed to orchestrate the disappearance of all those planets. And that means—“

“We can use it to find the planets!” Jack exclaimed.

“Then what are we waiting for?” Donna asked, already halfway back to the TARDIS.

The Doctor looked at Jack. “Run!”

They dashed back to the TARDIS, and the Doctor closed the doors behind them, then he went to the console and typed a few commands.

“See? There it is. Barely there, because it has already started to scatter, but if I enhance the range of the sensors and narrow down the frequency…” He made a few adjustments on a couple of instruments, tuning the sensors to the wavelengths of the Tandocca Scale until the remnants of the trail slowly grew more pronounced.
“Doc, there’s something going on outside,” Jack said, pointing to a monitor on the console. The Shadow Architect was standing opposite the TARDIS doors, accompanied by a platoon of Judoon who had surrounded the TARDIS.


“Over my dead body,” the Doctor said, flipping a switch and starting the dematerialisation sequence.

“Doctor, come —” The rest of her sentence was cut off when the TARDIS entered the time vortex.

“What was that?” Jack asked. “You could have told her that we have found something.”

The Doctor shook his head. “Been there, done that, during the early days of the Time War. The next thing that happened was that they tried to confiscate the TARDIS and order me to fight for them. The entire organisation is a lot like the Judoon: single-minded and unable to accept something that doesn’t fit into their picture of the universe.”

Despite the situation Jack grinned suddenly. “I guess that makes you the one with the warrant on his head.”

“Wouldn’t be the first time,” the Doctor gave back, adjusting their flight path slightly.

Donna grinned. “I knew it. I was abducted by an intergalactic criminal.”

“I didn’t abduct you!”

“Funny how it’s that part of her statement you choose to focus on,” Jack said, still grinning.

“Oi!”

~o~o~o~

“All humans will leave their homes. The males, the females, the descendants. You will come with us. Resistance is useless.”

Rose and Mickey had heard the screeching sounds coming nearer for some time but only now were able to make out what the Daleks were saying.

“At least they didn’t say ‘resistance is futile’, or else I’d never be able to watch a Star Trek episode with Borg again without remembering this,” Mickey said, already stowing the computer in his backpack.

“Yeah, but before our next Star Trek marathon we should make sure that we actually survive this,” Rose gave back, checking her weapon.

“Do you reckon they’ll check the houses and the premises?”

“Maybe not this time, if enough people follow their orders, but that doesn’t mean they won’t do a thorough search later on.”

“Then I guess that’s our cue. Let’s avoid the streets as much as we can.”

Rose nodded. She didn’t like leaving all those people in danger, but she knew she had no choice. She couldn’t help any of them if she got caught herself. Slowly she opened the door of the shed and looked outside. “The coast is clear.”
She went out and made her way through the garden towards the next building, looked around again, then quickly crossed the fence that separated the property from the next, Mickey giving her cover. Afterwards he crossed the fence himself, then took the lead.

Two houses down Rose looked around a bush and discovered an old man and a middle-aged woman hiding in the shadows of a house, whispering to each other. Then the woman pulled the man away, to the back of the house, where suddenly a Dalek appeared in front of them.

“Halt! You will come with me!” it screeched, and Rose winced.

The old man said something indistinguishable, then pointed a gun at the Dalek and fired. A blotch of yellow colour hit its eyestalk, coating it. For a moment it seemed as if the man would get away with it, but then the paint boiled away.

Rose got up, unable to watch what was going to happen without doing something.

“Rose, no! We can’t afford to be discovered!” Mickey hissed, but she was already taking aim.

“Hostility will not be tolerated!” the Dalek screeched. “Exterminate! Exterminate! Exterminate-“

She fired.

The blast hit the Dalek full force, splitting off its top half. All that remained was a smouldering wreck.

The old man recovered quickly from his surprise. “Do you want to swap?” he asked, holding out his paint-gun.

Rose smiled. “No, thanks. Even if it was a good idea. It might have worked with the older models, but they seem to have improved the design.”

“Do you know what they are?”

She nodded. “They’re an alien race called Daleks.”

“Can you stay?”

She shook her head. “We’re looking for someone.”

“Yeah, we’ve been looking for someone, too. There’s this man my granddaughter knows. He’s called the Doctor. He might be able to help,” the old man said. “But we can’t reach him. I’ve tried to call Donna as soon as this started, but she doesn’t answer. As if the signal is blocked.”

For a moment she just stared at them. “You’re Donna Noble’s family!” she exclaimed, a smile blossoming on her face. “Can I ask you for something? If you reach her, please tell her that Rose Tyler is back. She’ll know what that means. And now, please, take cover. Don’t come out, whatever they say.”

“Good luck, Rose.” Donna’s grandfather said. “She’s told me about you, and I’ll be cheering you on until you find him.”

“Thanks.” She hugged him impulsively, nodded at Donna’s mother, then gestured at Mickey. He got up and made his way towards the next house, Rose following him only seconds later.

~o~o~o~
The Doctor had just opened his mouth to reply to something Donna had asked when the time rotor suddenly stopped. He gripped the console to steady himself, then pressed a few buttons to check their status.

“It’s gone,” he said.

“What do you mean, ‘gone’?” Donna asked.

“The trail ends here.” His shoulders slumped. “And there’s absolutely no trace of the planets.”

“And where are we?”

“The Medusa Cascade. I came here when I was just a kid, studying at the Academy. It’s the centre of a rift in space and time.”

“Like the rift in Cardiff?” Jack asked.

The Doctor shook his head. “Compared to this, the Cardiff rift is nothing more than a pothole.”

“But what about the lost planets? What about Earth? What about my family?” Donna asked.

“Donna, don’t you see? We’re at a dead end.”

“But you can’t give up! Not now! Not like this!”

The Doctor almost collapsed on the jump seat. “It’s over.”

“But you must have an idea. You always have an idea!”

The Doctor looked at her, his eyes completely lifeless. “No, Donna. I wished it was true, but... I had no idea how to prevent the Time War, no idea how to save all those lives, no idea how to get to Rose...”

“Rose...” Jack repeated slowly. “But that’s it!” Suddenly the former time agent was grinning like a loon.

“Leave her out of this, Jack...” The Doctor’s voice was dangerously calm, but at least he didn’t sound as defeated as he had only seconds before.

“No, Doc, listen. You said that the dreams stopped because the TARDIS refused to make the connection, right?” He looked at the Doctor, but went on without waiting for an answer. “But she’d never do that without a reason. What if... what if she knew that whatever is going on would cause the walls between universes to collapse, and that a connection would be too dangerous because of that?”

“And why didn’t she just tell me then?”

Jack shrugged. “Maybe she couldn’t. Maybe she needed to protect the integrity of the timelines. Maybe you pissed her off. You’re the Time Lord, you should tell me. Anyway, if that’s the case, and if this is affecting the other universe as well, what would Rose have done?”

Realisation dawned in the Doctor’s eyes. “If the walls between universes were breaking down... She would have tried to find me. On Earth.”

“And now... If she really is in this universe, do you think you can use your connection to find her?”
“Jack, I already told you, it doesn’t work like a phone call.”

“I never said you needed to contact her. But if you use your connection as if you followed a telephone cable to the nearest phone...”

“Do you think that’ll work?” the Doctor asked the ceiling, trying to sound as if it was just an academic question, as if the answer didn’t really matter, but unable to keep the hope out of his voice.

The hum changed slightly and the lights dimmed. The Doctor closed his eyes for a moment, then looked at them again.

“What does she say?” Donna asked.

“She doesn’t like it. She doesn’t like the entire situation. But she’ll try. She really must like me.” A tiny smile appeared on his lips.

“Oh maybe Rose,” Jack commented.

The Doctor glared at him, but more out of principle than anything else — especially since Jack was most likely right. Then he shut everything else out and concentrated on his connection with Rose and the TARDIS.

~o~o~o~

After the end of the Time War, the silence in his head had been deafening. He had even shut out his TARDIS as much as possible. The wound would never heal completely, but ever since meeting Rose he had slowly been coming to terms with what he had done. Then Rose had agreed to bond with him, and an almost imperceptible spark had ignited in his mind that would grow stronger along with their bond.

He was dimly aware that he was standing in the middle of the console room, and that Donna and Jack were watching him, but it didn’t matter. He could have been in a lush forest, or on a crowded street, it wouldn’t have made any difference. He shut his senses down, one by one, until the tiny golden presence at the back of his mind became the centre of his attention. Then he reached out, to both the TARDIS and the presence at exactly the same time, and suddenly his mind expanded into every possible and several impossible dimensions, perceiving the universe as the TARDIS did.

For a long moment he just was, then he began to narrow his focus down, until he once more found the spark that represented Rose in his mind. He regarded it for some time, then discovered a small golden tendril emanating from it. Slowly he began to follow it with his mind, careful not to touch the presence itself, because he had no idea what that might do to their still developing bond, or to Rose, for that matter. She could have died because she had tried to help them on Xeriax, and he wanted to avoid a repetition at all costs.

If he just wasn’t so tired. He hadn’t slept since before Midnight, hadn’t been able to, and fighting the entity had taken its toll as well. He took a moment to push his exhaustion away, to sharpen his concentration. He could collapse later. Now there were more important things at stake.

He returned his attention to the connection with Rose. In the beginning it had been like Jack had suggested, just following a cable towards the nearest telephone, but it grew harder with every second. Whatever was happening here was indeed affecting the walls between universes, and now countless realities were tugging at the flimsy thread like a storm searching for a weakness in a roof. If this went on for much longer, it might damage both the TARDIS and his mind, and maybe it would even be dangerous for Rose. No wonder the TARDIS had refused to make a connection.
His body moved around the console, his hands pressed buttons and flipped switches by pure instinct, until the time rotor began to move. The ship was shaking madly, but there wasn’t anything he could do about that right now. Detachedly he registered that Donna and Jack were clinging to the nearest handholds. His focus was still on the connection with Rose and the TARDIS. He followed it like he would follow a safety leash during an ice storm in the Antarctic, because if he lost it he’d be lost as well. He leant on a lever, having to force it into the correct position, then the shaking suddenly stopped, and he almost collapsed against the console.

For a moment silence settled in the TARDIS, then the cloister bell began to ring.

~o~o~o~

“What’s wrong?” Jack yelled over the alarm.

“I don’t know,” the Doctor gave back, already checking the instruments. He flipped a switch and the alarm died down.

“Doctor, look!” Donna pointed at another monitor. “There’s Earth! And all those other missing planets! But why couldn’t we see them before?”

One of the sensors dinged, and the Doctor pressed a button. Forms he had hoped to never see again appeared on the tactical display and he forgot completely about Donna’s question. He gripped the monitor so hard he could have broken it in half.

“Doc?” the former time agent asked, sensing something was really, really wrong.

“See for yourself, Jack.”

“Is that...”

“Daleks.” His voice was devoid of emotion. He had already suspected it when he had realised that the planets had been taken out of time, but he had hoped that for once he was wrong. He should have known he wouldn’t get away that easily.

“Doc! Incoming ships in sector seven!” Jack interrupted his thoughts, and without conscious thought he initiated an evasion manoeuvre, bringing the TARDIS closer to Earth in the process. Apparently the old reflexes still worked. He just hoped that also applied to the shields. Unfortunately the manoeuvre took his companions by surprise, and Donna ended up on the floor, while Jack had clung to the console, his eyes never leaving the screen.

“A warning would have been nice,” Donna said, coming back to her feet.

“I could have waited until the Daleks had hit us,” the Doctor bit back, once again sending the TARDIS into a spiral to avoid the returning ships who had started firing even before they came into range.

“Nice manoeuvre,” Jack commented.

“Something about this doesn’t add up,” the Doctor said, ignoring the comment. “There must be an entire Dalek fleet around somewhere, and yet only two fighters are attacking us.”

“A trap?”

“Exactly. And we’re going to walk-“ A light suddenly began to flash on the console, and he interrupted himself. “Incoming transmission.” He pressed a button and suddenly a voice he had
thought he would never hear again filled the console room.

“Welcome to my new empire, Doctor!” the voice said. “It is only fitting that you should bear witness to the resurrection and the triumph of Davros, Lord and Creator of the Dalek Race.”

Donna stumbled back a few steps. “But how can he be here? He was on Skaro when the Daleks imprisoned me, but you said that was in the past, Doctor!”

“Do you have nothing to say?” Davros taunted.

“No,” the Doctor replied coldly, pressing the send button.

“Don’t you want to know how I created this new race of Daleks?”

“No,” the Doctor repeated, his voice becoming even colder, if possible. “Because it doesn’t matter.”

“Oh, I think you’ll find it does, Doctor.”

“No. Because here’s what’s gonna happen. I’m gonna save the Earth and all those other planets, and then I’m gonna do what I should have done ages ago: kill you and every single one of your precious Daleks, once and for all.” His voice was dangerously calm, and he could see that it scared Donna more than if he had shouted.

He ended the transmission and glanced at the tactical display. The Dalek fighters were back. Once more he drove the TARDIS into an evasion manoeuvre. He hadn’t even finished it when suddenly Donna’s phone began to ring.

Even though she currently was clinging to the console, she somehow managed to pull it out and took the call. “We’re a bit busy at the moment, Granddad... No, we can’t... Really? ... Are you sure? ... Love you, too. Bye.”

She switched the phone off and said, in a tone that brooked no argument, “We need to go to Chiswick. Now.”

“Sector eight, Doc,” Jack said, staring at the tactical display. “Donna, as much as I know you love your Granddad, there are more important-“

“No, Jack, we need to go to Chiswick. There’s nothing more important than that,” she said, a smile blossoming on her face. “That’s why my Granddad called. She’s there.”

“Who’s there?” the Doctor said distractedly, busy with the controls.

“Rose.”

For a long moment that couldn’t have lasted longer than half a second the Doctor just stared at her, trying to process what she had just said, until the full force of her words hit him. Then he forced the TARDIS in a couple of manoeuvres that confused the two Dalek ships so much that they eventually collided with each other.

“That should buy us some time,” he said, already setting a new course.

~o~o~o~

“Owen! Dalek ships heading for the Bay! They’ve found us!” Ianto yelled.

Owen rushed to the terminal. “Damn! And all of our weapons are completely useless against Daleks.
Tosh, ideas?”

The scientist looked up from her workstation. “Working on it. But I need more time.”

Owen nodded. “Ianto, how long until they’re here?”

“Five minutes, maybe ten,” Ianto said.

“Tosh?”

“Fifteen would be better.”

“Okay. We’ll do what we can.” He turned around. “Gwen? Where are you?”

The woman in question emerged from the armoury. “I thought we might need these.” She handed weapons to the men. “Better than nothing.”

“Thanks.”

The three Torchwood agents moved into positions that would allow them to cover both the lift leading to the Plass and the main entrance.

For four long minutes nothing happened, then suddenly there was a crash above. Rubble fell from the ceiling and dust filled the room.

“I guess that was the tourist information centre,” Ianto said. “They’re here.”

Owen checked his weapon. “Tosh?”

“Working on it!”

“Gwen, any activity at the invisible lift?”

She checked the monitor. “No. It seems they are concentrating on the main entrance. Maybe they don’t know about the lift.”

“Then come here. We could use additional firepower.”

They adjusted their battle positions, taking cover behind desks and drawers.

Then another crash sounded and the door to the vault creaked open.

“Exterminate!”

A Dalek glided into the vault, its eyestalk taking everything in.

The three Torchwood agents fired before it had even finished the word, but nothing happened.

“It must be shielded!” Ianto yelled.

“Keep shooting!” Owen gave back.

The Dalek pointed its weapon at Gwen, and it began to glow.

Gwen screamed but kept firing at the Dalek nonetheless. Then she noticed something weird.

“Guys! You can stop! Look!”
Their bullets had stopped in midair, and the Dalek looked as if it was frozen.

Silence filled the room.

“What the hell just happened?” Owen asked.

“A time-lock,” Tosh answered. “It contains the entire hub. As long as it’s activated, nothing can get in, not even an entire Dalek fleet. I’ve been working on that on and off for the last year.”

“If you say, nothing gets in...” Gwen said. “Are we locked in here?”

“Yeah. We still receive data and can send messages, but apart from that we’re trapped inside. Unless we decide to unlock that Dalek,” she added dryly.

~o~o~o~

They had maybe made it another kilometre after meeting Donna’s grandfather, when Rose suddenly stopped dead in her tracks. She had heard a noise that sounded like nothing else in the universe. She held up a hand and waved. Within seconds Mickey was standing next to her.

“Is that...?” he asked.

“Yeah.” She smiled. “That’s the TARDIS.”

Without a second thought she moved towards the sound, Mickey following her slower.

“Rose, wait!” he hissed. “The Daleks!”

She ignored him, unable to wait any longer. It had been much too long. All those years during which she had clung to the hope that she would see him again, all those moments she had wanted to share with him, all those things she had done. And even though she knew she needed to tell him, not only about her mum, but also about that man she had so much wanted to kill, all she wanted now was to see him again, hear his voice, hold his hand, no matter the danger.

She was already on the street before the TARDIS had fully materialised, and her speed increased with every step. She slung her gun over her shoulder and accelerated.

Then the TARDIS door opened and her eyes locked with the most intense blue eyes she had ever seen, and even though she was running full tilt it felt as if the moment was frozen in time.

In the back of her head she counted down the metres that still separated her from the Doctor. Fourty... Thirty... Twenty-Five...

Then several things happened at the same time.

“Down!” she heard Mickey’s voice, dimly over the roaring in her ears, even though he must have shouted.

Her body moved out of its own volition. Rose dove to the ground, coiling herself up to protect her body in a much-practised move. She barely registered the gun hitting her back, the blow at least partly cushioned by her leather jacket. She ended up on her belly, protecting her head with her arms.

“Exterminate!” a voice shrieked, and the distinctive sound of a Dalek death ray filled the air.

An explosion shook the air, and debris rained down on her. Her ears rang.
Then she realised that someone had entered her personal space, and she reached for the small blaster in the holster on her hip, but a voice stopped her.

“Rose.”

Nobody had ever said her name like he did. It was just one word, but the way he said it this time conveyed so many emotions he would never openly admit, not even to her.

She turned around and looked him in the eyes for a seemingly endless amount of time, saw the loneliness that always lurked near the surface, but also the sheer joy on seeing her again and love so powerful it took her breath away. She hoped he could read as much in her eyes as she in his, because she seemed unable to utter a single word.

Then another explosion in a nearby street shattered the moment.

The Doctor held out his hand and helped her up.

“Rose?” he repeated.

“Yes, Doctor?”

“Run!”

~0~0~0~
“Nice weapon!” Jack commented, when Mickey entered the TARDIS. “Villengard?”

“It has come in handy,” Mickey said. “We found a couple of blasters on a crash site, and our scientists did some reverse engineering with them. Even though the development came too late for the last invasion, they thought they would be helpful.”

Jack considered the other man. “You’ve changed a lot since I last saw you.”

Mickey shrugged. “I’ve grown up.”

Before he could say more, Rose came up to them and hugged him. “Thanks, Mickey. I wouldn’t be here if you hadn’t stopped that Dalek. I should have waited for you.”

Mickey grinned. “Babe, that’s what partners are for. Besides, you’ve got a reputation for being jeopardy-friendly, so I kind of figured you’d just run off as soon as you heard the TARDIS.”

Apparently the exchange had alerted the Doctor to his presence, because he turned away from the monitor he had been staring at and straightened.

“Mickey Smith.” A small smile appeared on the Doctor’s lips, then he became serious again and looked him straight in the eye. “Thank you.”

Mickey slightly bowed his head, unable to say anything, feeling the weight of the Doctor’s words almost physically.

“So we’re here, but what now, Doctor?” the redhead woman — Donna — asked, breaking the silence that had settled in the console room. “I mean, you said the planets were like an engine, but for what?”

The Doctor looked at Rose, who had returned to his side and was now leaning against the console.

“Rose, what was happening on Pete’s World when you left? Maybe that’ll help us understand what’s going on here.”

“The stars were going out, one by one,” she said. “No supernova, no collapsing into black holes, they just... blinked out of existence. At first, only the large telescopes could detect the phenomenon, later also hobby astronomers. It’s only been two or three days since the general public realised something was wrong.

“Neither we or our alien allies had any idea what it was or how to stop it. When we contacted them, they had already sent out scout ships and space probes, but lost contact as soon as the crafts reached the dark regions. Eventually Torchwood decided that we had no choice, that our only chance was to find you, even though we knew that we might destroy the universe in the process. We were desperate.

“At first we tried to send messages. I don’t know how many times I stood in that small cabin to contact you and hoped that maybe this time it would work, and I would appear on a monitor in the TARDIS and you would look at it at the same time.”
Something like dawning realisation crossed the Doctor’s face, but it was gone so fast Mickey wasn’t sure he had actually seen it.

Rose continued, “Even though we hoped that sending a message might be enough, we had already begun to build a device that would allow us to cross the void. Mickey calls it a dimension cannon.”

“Yeah, because it feels like sitting on a cannon ball that’s been shot across the universe at light speed,” Mickey threw in.

“It was weird. It was ready, but it didn’t work, until it suddenly did. I think it’s because the walls between universes had finally broken down so far that it didn’t matter anymore if there were natural cracks that would allow us to safely cross into another universe.”

“So whatever Davros and the Daleks are doing is already affecting the multiverse,” the Doctor concluded. “And if it continues, it’s going to unravel all of time and space.”

“And how do we stop it?” Mickey asked.

“We wait,” the Time Lord gave back.

“We wait?” Mickey repeated incredulously. The Doctor had just told them that the entire multiverse, that reality itself was in danger, and now he was telling them to wait?

But before he could say something about that the lights went out.

“Power loss?” Jack asked.

The Doctor tried a few switches on the console. “Looks like.”

Then a crash shook the TARDIS, and it tilted to one side.

“I guess that’s our transport,” he said, grimly.

“But where are they taking us?” Donna wanted to know.

“Since Davros will want to boast about his victory in person, their command centre, most likely. And that’s exactly where we need to be.”

“Why?” Donna asked.

“Because if you want to thwart an operation, it’s easier to do it from within,” Jack explained. “And the command centre is the place where everything comes together.”

“Wait,” Mickey said, his former anger forgotten. “When I hacked into Torchwood, I came across a report. Apparently there’s a massive Dalek ship at the centre of the planets. If I had to guess, I’d say that’s where we’ll end up.”

“You hacked into Torchwood?” Jack asked.

“Yeah. We had to find out what was going on when we got here, so I hacked into their computer, which gave me access to all relevant data streams, military, UNIT, Torchwood, you name it.”

“But that’s impossible.”
“Not really. You’re using the same protocols we did almost eight years ago.” He thought for a moment. “Don’t tell me, Toshiko Sato.”

“How’d you know that?”

“Because I’ve worked with her, in our Torchwood.”

Jack shook his head disbelievingly. “I guess I’ll have to tell her to get a bit more unpredictable, once this is over,” he said. “To surprise herself on occasion.”

Donna had followed the exchange with fascination. “This parallel universe thing is weird,” she said to Rose. “I mean, he’s got a time machine, and you’d say it can’t get weirder than that, but this...”

“I know what you mean. My mum fell in love with my parallel dad, and now I have a little brother.”

Even though Rose was smiling, Mickey could see the look in her eyes. He just hoped that once this was over she would talk to the Doctor, because what she was doing wasn’t healthy. For months she had pretended she was alright, but she wasn’t. She still refused to mourn Jackie, even though she had finally acknowledged that her mum was likely dead, and she still hadn’t come to terms with what she had done to save Tony. He had told her that it had been an act of self-defence, but she felt guilty because she had wanted to kill, not only the thug that had pressed a knife against Tony’s throat, but also the others. Until that day in the tunnels Rose Tyler, the girl he had known since childhood, had somehow managed to keep her innocence despite all those things she had seen and done, and now she had lost something irretrievable. If anyone could help her, it would be the Doctor. His thoughts had reached that point when the TARDIS suddenly crashed.

“I guess we’ve landed, then,” Jack stated grimly and looked at one of the monitors to see what was going on outside. “They are surrounding us.”

A Dalek with a red shell, apparently their leader, moved forward and screeched, “Doctor! You will come outside or die!”

Jack glanced at the Doctor. “Are the shields going to hold?”

The Time Lord looked back at the other man. “No.” There was so much finality in that single word that Mickey shivered involuntarily.

Then the Doctor locked his eyes with Rose’s, entwining his fingers with hers, and Mickey could have sworn they were communicating silently, even though he couldn’t read their expressions.

“We go down fighting, yeah?” Rose said eventually.

“Together.” He tightened his grip at her hand and leant his forehead against hers, cupping her cheek with his other hand, a gesture so intimate Mickey had to look away.

Eventually the Time Lord straightened again, let go of Rose’s hand and turned to the others. “Right. No time like the present. Let’s go meet the neighbours.”

“You’ll want to go outside?” Donna asked. “Are you mad?”

“Quite possibly, yes!” The Doctor gave her a grin Mickey had seen before, and that Donna
must have seen as well, judging from her expression. The one that said they had nothing to lose. Becoming serious again, he explained, “We don’t have a choice. Right now, those doors over there are nothing more than wood.”

Donna nodded silently.

Then the Doctor opened the doors.

~o~o~o~

As soon as Rose had entered the TARDIS, she had heard singing in her head. At first she had thought it was because the ship was happy to see her again, just as happy as she had been herself, but now she wasn’t so sure. Slowly the singing had become more intense, almost overwhelming her. The tune was familiar, somehow, but she couldn’t quite place it, and the more she thought about it the more the answer seemed to evade her.

“Rose? Everything alright?” Donna asked, touching her arm gently.

For a moment Rose was almost disoriented, then she shook off the notion. “Yeah.”

“We should go. Everyone else is already outside.”

Rose nodded and followed Donna slowly, but with the feeling that the TARDIS was where she should be. She stopped and looked back at the console.

“Rose, Donna!” Jack yelled from the outside, barely audible over the Daleks chanting something. “Come on!”

“Rose?” Donna was waiting for her, only two or three steps from the doors.

Once again Rose tried to shake the notion that had fallen on her and once again began to move towards Donna, but before she had reached her the doors fell shut.

“What the hell?” Donna muttered, then banged at the door. “Doctor? What’ve you done?” she shouted. “I’m not staying behind!”

Over the singing in her head Rose faintly heard the Doctor say, “What did you do?”

“This is not of Dalek origin!” a cold, mechanical voice said.

“This is of Time Lord treachery!” the Doctor demanded.

“No! It wasn’t me! Let them out!” Even though he somehow managed to keep his fear out of his voice, Rose could feel it racing through her mind like a shock wave, clearing her thoughts like a bucket of cold water. She needed to do something.

“Donna, grab something and hold onto it, just in case,” she said, racing back to the console to do the same.

She had barely reached it when the Dalek screeched, “The TARDIS is a weapon and must be destroyed!”

Then they were suddenly falling.
For a moment she closed her eyes, gathering her strength. Then she pushed herself up, fighting against the acceleration of the TARDIS as the ship fell further and further. Suddenly the lights on the console exploded, scattering the room with glass, and small fires sprang up below the grating.

“What was that?” Donna asked, having got up again as well.

“No idea. But we’re no longer falling, or only very slowly.”

“It’s getting warm here.”

Rose nodded. “We must have reached the energy core of this thing. And I don’t think the shields are strong enough to protect us. We’ll have to get the TARDIS out of here. Do you have any idea how to fly her?”

“No. You?”

She stared at the console and tried to remember what the Doctor did when flying the TARDIS, but it had been too long. He’d never really explained what he was doing, just told her to hold a lever down or flip a switch.

“Not really.”

“Bloody alien. A few explanations would have been really helpful now,” Donna said conversationally, resignation lacing her voice.

“Yeah.”

They exchanged a long look.

“There must be something we can do,” Rose muttered, the singing in her head getting louder once more.

“Wait! Jack told me that the Doctor had sent you away from a space station or something, and that you came back to them. Didn’t you fly the TARDIS then?”

Rose stared at her for a moment, suddenly everything clicking into place. “Donna, you’re brilliant!”

Donna shrugged. “I’m just a temp. Ordinary.”

Rose shook her head. “You’re not ordinary. You’re anything but. He only ever takes the best. And you are one of the best. Besides, I’m just a shop girl.” She grinned suddenly. “You know what? That could be like one of those ridiculous superhero movies: Supertemp and Shop Girl Save the Universe!”

Donna grinned back. “You’re as mad as him!” Then she became serious again. “And what do we do now?”

A small smile played around Rose’s lips. “I’m going to do something incredibly stupid. Again.” She paused, considering. “I’m not entirely sure what’s going to happen, but I think I will be in some kind of trance. Don’t bring me out of it unless you absolutely have to.”

“Okay. And how do I bring you back?”

Rose eyed her speculatively, then grinned. “You’ll think of something, I’m sure.”
Then she touched the console, closed her eyes and concentrated, shutting everything else out. She had no idea if this would work, because she had never been able to contact the Doctor or the TARDIS on her own before, but this time she was already inside the ship, and maybe the physical contact would help. Slowly she began to descend into her mind, searching for the golden knot that represented her connection with the TARDIS. At least this time she already knew what she was looking for. When she had reached the golden knot, she paused for a moment, praying she was doing the right thing, that this would work. Then she reached out with her mind and touched it.

_Doctor..._

For an immeasurable amount of time nothing happened. Then she suddenly could feel his presence as if he was standing directly behind her, much like it had been in the dreams. He was moving with her around the console, guiding her hand, placing her fingers on the right buttons. She flipped one last switch and the column began to move and the TARDIS dematerialised.

~o~o~o~

Jack’s heart broke for the tall man standing in front of him. Only one hour ago, the Doctor’s eyes had lit up when he had discovered Rose on that street. Despite the situation, the danger they were in, the Doctor had been _happy_, really and truly happy. He hadn’t shouted his joy at the sky, hadn’t danced around the console, but it had been there, quiet contentment that the woman he loved was back at his side.

Only one hour ago, the universe had finally been _right_ again.

And now...

Mickey had railed and raged against the Daleks. Jack had only barely held back from doing the same, but had somehow managed to calm the younger man down by sending him pointed glares. It would do them no good to get themselves killed, and even though his death would have been a lot less permanent than Mickey’s, he really could do without repeating the experience. Besides, Rose would probably kill him if something happened to Mickey, he thought, then he remembered. Rose was gone.

The Doctor’s face was an expressionless mask when he finally looked up at the Supreme Dalek again. He didn’t say anything, in fact hadn’t spoken or moved since the TARDIS had fallen through that trapdoor, Donna and Rose trapped inside. Now he just stared at the Dalek that was taunting him, his eyes colder than Jack had ever seen them before.

“You done?” the Doctor asked frostily when the Supreme Dalek fell finally silent, and Jack shivered at the power of barely contained emotions in his voice.

“Escort them to the vault,” the Supreme Dalek ordered.

Four Dalek guards moved forward and herded them towards the belly of the ship, until a large room opened in front of them.

“Activate holding cells,” the voice that had contacted the TARDIS earlier said, then a misshapen figure emerged from the shadows, the wreck of a man supported by the lower part of a Dalek shell. “Even if powerless, the Time Lord is best contained.”

Jack could feel a force field closing around him, and he tentatively reached out. Blue light rippled where his palm touched the holding cell. Out of the corner of his eye he could see
Mickey doing the same, while the Doctor didn’t so much as bat an eye, as if he were somewhere else.

Then suddenly he was back in the room with them. “That all you’ve got to say, Davros? No pathetic little speech? But then, what else should I expect of the plaything of the Daleks? Because that’s what you are. Nothing more than a pet!” He spit the last word out, staring at Davros disdainfully.

“Doc, no! You’re gonna get us killed!” Jack hissed.

“My companions are gone, my ship with them,” the Doctor gave back, staring at him intently. “Do you really think my life matters to me anymore, Jack?”

The Doctor was trying to tell him something, Jack was certain. It took him a couple of seconds, then he realised what it was. As long as he had known the Doctor, he had never, not once, referred to Rose as his companion. And that meant... He could barely suppress a grin.

He slowly closed his eyes, then opened them again, hoping the Doctor would understand that he had received the message and would play along, providing a distraction if needed. Besides, before they could stop the Daleks they had to find out what they were on about. He couldn’t be sure that Mickey realised what they were trying to do, but the young man was clever and would catch on eventually.

“Tell them what you’ve seen, Dalek Caan!” Davros demanded, and a light suddenly illuminated a platform with a broken Dalek shell, on top of which sat a Dalek in his true form.

“This I have foreseen in the wild and the wind,” the Dalek sing-songed. “The Doctor will be here, as witness, at the end of everything. The Doctor and his precious Children of Time! And one of them will die...!” It cackled, and a shiver ran down Jack’s spine.

“What’s that thing?” Mickey asked, sounding shocked.

“Remember the Cult of Skaro? Canary Wharf?” the Doctor gave back distractedly.

“He’s one of them?” Mickey asked incredulously. “I mean, not that I liked them back then, but at least they sounded more or less normal, at least for aliens who wanted to kill each and everyone who was not like them. That thing’s just... insane!”

“An emergency temporal shift took him back into the Time War, and he saved me. It cost him his mind, and yet he succeeded,” Davros said.

“I flew into the fire and the wild. I danced and died a thousand times,” Dalek Caan sang. “And I have seen it. At the time of ending, the Doctor’s soul will be revealed.”

“What does that even mean?” Mickey commented.

“We will discover it together, Doctor,” Davros said. “Our final journey. Because the ending approaches. The testing begins.”

Mickey shook Jack a glance. “Is that sort of insanity infectious? Because I don’t understand him either.”

Jack grinned, despite the situation. Mickey was playing along as well. “No idea.”

“Testing of what?” the Doctor asked Davros, ignoring the exchange.
“The reality bomb,” Davros said, pressing a button on his control panel.


Davros pressed another button. “Behold, the apotheosis of my genius.”

A holographic screen activated, showing a group of people in a chamber together with a large circular device over their heads and a view of the twenty-seven planets at the same time.

“...Two. One. Zero. Activate planetary alignment field.”

The Doctor stared at the screen in horror. The planets had started to emanate a white glow that became stronger with every passing second.

“That’s Z-Neutrino Energy, flattened into one single stream by the alignment of the planets...” His voice was barely audible, and if possible Jack grew even more scared. Then the Doctor suddenly pressed his hands against the force field, as if he wanted to break it by sheer power of will. “No! You’ve got to stop this!”

“Doc? What does that mean?”

“Watch!” Davros ordered, and Jack wouldn’t have been able to tear his eyes away from the screen if he had tried.

The glow from the planets was almost blinding now, no longer just visible on the part of the screen that showed the Medusa Cascade, but also in the chamber that held the group of people. To his horror their bodies began to dissolve into atoms, until there was nothing more than dust in the chamber. Then the light dissipated, leaving an empty room behind.

“Test completed,” the Supreme Dalek announced over the speakers.

“Doctor?”

“Electrical energy, Jack,” the Time Lord explained, trying to sound matter-of-factly and failing. “The reality bomb cancels out the electrical field that binds atoms together. And the planets in this alignment serve as a massive transmitter.”

Jack stared at him in shock, not really sure if the Doctor had meant what he thought he did, but before he could voice another question, Davros moved towards them.

“This is my ultimate victory, Doctor! The destruction of reality itself. The wavelength will continue across the entire universe, never faltering, never fading. Planets will dissolve to dust, the dust into atoms, and the atoms into... nothing. And still the wavelength will move on, breaking through the rift at the heart of the Medusa Cascade, into every dimension, every parallel universe, every corner of creation!”

“So that’s why the stars are going out,” Mickey said. “We could see it, because our universe runs ahead of this one. Does that mean-“

He was interrupted by the voice of the Supreme Dalek.

“Prepare for universal detonation! The fleet will gather at the Crucible. All Daleks will return to shelter from the cataclysm. We will become the only life forms in existence.”
“The final prophecy is in place,” Davros declared, his voice trembling with excitement. “The time has come. Detonate the reality bomb!”

Jack’s view was captivated by the screen, where the planets once again had begun to glow.

“Universal reality detonation in two hundred rels,” the Supreme Dalek announced over the speakers.

“Stop this, Davros! Or I’m gonna stop you!” the Doctor said, glaring at the man sitting in the Dalek shell.

Davros cackled. “And how are you going to do that, Time Lord? Your companions are either dead or prisoners, your ship is destroyed! You’re helpless as a child! Nothing can stop the detonation! Nothing! And no one!”

“And that is where you’re wrong,” the Doctor replied coldly, his words underlined by the sound of the universe.

The TARDIS materialised in front of them, for the moment blocking them from the row of Daleks standing along the wall. The door opened, and Rose appeared, one blaster in her hands, the other on her back. She looked around briefly, taking the situation in, then took a few quick steps away from the TARDIS, pointing her weapon at Davros.

“Let them go,” she demanded.

“That’s your plan, Doctor?” Davros cackled. “A woman with a gun? Pathetic!” He pointed his finger at Rose and a blast of electricity hit her in the chest. She crumbled on the floor.

“Rose!” the Doctor yelled.

“I’m fine,” she managed, drawing in ragged breaths. “Just didn’t expect he’d go all Emperor Palpatine on me.”

Mickey laughed, despite the situation.

“Activate holding cell,” Davros ordered, and a force field activated around her.

“Donna, the console!” Jack shouted at Donna who had appeared in the TARDIS door at the Doctor’s scream and had escaped Davros’s attention so far.

Without hesitation Donna raced towards the console and ducked behind it, thus avoiding another blast of electrical energy from Davros. “But what do I do?”

“Deactivate the holding cells!” the Doctor shouted.

“But I don’t know how!”

“Yes, you do! Donna, you’re a temp! You know your way around a computer. Any computer!” Rose said encouragingly, having recovered enough to stand up again. “Deactivate the holding cells!”

Donna regarded the console for a moment, then pressed four buttons whose status lights had been glowing, and the force fields vanished.

“Yes!” Mickey said. “So much for the holding cells!”
“Here, Mick!” Rose chucked the weapon she had been holding to him and took the one she had carried on her back into her hands in one swift movement.

“Thanks!” He directed the blaster at Davros, who was touching the control panel in front of him. “I really wouldn’t do that if I were you, mate!”

One of the Daleks had finally moved around the TARDIS and directed his weapon at the Doctor, who was already halfway to the console Donna was manning.

“Extermi-,” was all it got out, then Jack blew up its shell with his Compact Laser Deluxe.

“Detonation in sixty rels,” the Supreme Dalek announced over the chaos that had descended.

“We’ve got to stop that bomb from going off!” the Doctor shouted, rounding the console.

“You and Rose do that, Mickey and I have your backs!”

“Thanks, Jack!” Rose said. “Do you want to swap?” She nodded at his blaster. “Even though I really don’t wanna know where you kept that.”

He grinned at her. “Nah, I’m fine. Go help him, Rosie!”

Rose wasted no more time. Slinging the blaster back over her shoulder, she raced to the console, casting concerned glances at the three Daleks lining up in front of it. Jack would never be able to stop all three of them, what with Mickey keeping an eye (and a blaster) fixed on Davros.

“Donna, can you do something about their weapons?” she asked, watching the Doctor press buttons and flick switches. “Doctor?”

“I need to create an internalised synchronous back-feed reversal loop to close the Z-Neutrino relay loops.”


“Right. No pressure, then.” Rose regarded the control panel for a moment, then pressed a button and the glow from the planets dissipated.

The Doctor stared at her. “What did you do?”

“Emergency shut-down. First rule of electrical engineering: If in doubt, pull the plug.” She grinned.

“Ah.”

“You will suffer for this,” Davros declared, his right hand once again touching the control pad in front of him.

Mickey quickly pressed a button on his blaster, then fired. “That was the stun setting. Should keep your arm paralysed for about an hour. Do it again, and you lose the limb.”

“Exterminate them!” Davros ordered, his breath laboured, and the Daleks moved forward.

“Now would be good, Donna,” the Doctor said, urgency evident in his voice.

Donna grinned and flicked one last switch. “There you go.”
“Weapons non-functional,” one of the Daleks screeched.

“Like Rose said. I’m a temp, I know my way around a computer.”

“Right. Let’s send the planets home!” the Doctor exclaimed, already working on the controls. “Activate magnetron!”

“Stop it at once!” Davros ordered. “Get them away from the controls!”

The Daleks moved forward again, and this time Donna turned a dial, causing the Daleks to spin. “Huh, didn’t think that would work!” she mused, then grinned.

“Systems malfunctioning!” one of the Daleks screeched.

“Rose, I need you to help me send the planets back,” the Doctor said. “I’m not sure how long they’ll still be able to maintain their atmospheric shells.”

“Sure. Just tell me what to do.”

They worked together seamlessly, anticipating what the other would do, and one by one the planets disappeared in blinding flashes of light.

“We’ve lost the magnetron,” Rose said eventually. “And there’s still one planet left.”

“Don’t tell me. Earth.” The Doctor shook his head. “Typical.”

“Any ideas?”

“Yeah. But first...” His gaze became cold, and he glared at Davros. “First I’ll have to finish something.”

“Doctor?” Rose asked.

“This is a full-fledged Dalek empire out there, and if I don’t do something about it, they’ll wreck havoc on the universe, with or without the reality bomb. And there’s no one left who’d be able to fight them.”

“And what are you gonna do?”

He looked her in the eyes, his steel-blue eyes bleak as she had never seen them before. “Destroy them.”

Rose held his gaze, searching his eyes as if she wanted to look into his soul. Eventually she nodded. “You’re right. We’ve got to do something about the Daleks. And since it’s a waste of breath to reason with them, this is the only way to keep the universe safe. But I’m not gonna let you do this alone. We’ll do it together.”

“Rose...” He stared at her in astonishment. “You don’t have to...”

“No. But I will. You’re not alone in this.” She paused. “And how?”

“Not even Davros would be so stupid not to leave a backdoor, in case the Daleks decided they didn’t need him anymore.”

“And he would have hardwired it into their genetic code...” Rose thought aloud.
“...and make it easily accessible, even for him,” the Doctor concluded. “Which leaves...”

“...the console or his control panel.”

“You’re scary when you do that sort of thing,” Mickey commented, still pointing his blaster at Davros. “Do you need me to persuade him to give up his control panel?”

“No. It’s the console. This needs a bit more power than his control panel,” the Doctor said. He stared at the console for a long moment, taking everything in, then his hand moved to one of the buttons.

“This one,” he said, lightly touching the button.

Then Rose’s hand covered his and she captured his eyes. “Together,” she said.

Their hands moved in perfect synchrony, pressing the button, and the Daleks began to explode around them.

“TARDIS, now!” the Doctor ordered, not caring about the chaos descending upon them. He reached for Rose’s hand, and together they raced towards the time ship, followed by Donna, Mickey and Jack, who closed the door behind them.

The Doctor wasted no time working on the controls, and before they had even fully dematerialised the Crucible exploded around them, the shock wave following them into the Time Vortex.

“But what about the Earth?” Donna asked, as soon as she was standing upright again.

“Working on it,” the Doctor said, re-materialising the TARDIS in space. “Jack, can you contact the Torchwood hub?”

“Sure.” He pressed a few buttons on the console. “Jack Harkness calling the Torchwood hub. Are you receiving me?”

“Loud and clear,” Owen said over the speakers.

“Torchwood hub, this is the Doctor. I want you to open the rift manipulator. Send all the power to me.”

“What for?”

“Well, I could leave the Earth in the Medusa Cascade, but then the atmospheric shell would break down over time, and people would die. Plus, I really don’t fancy dealing with the aftershock when the absence of Earth somehow causes your solar system to collapse.” The Doctor looked at Jack. “Is he always like this?”

Jack shrugged. “Normally he’s worse.” He once again pressed the button at the console. “Do what he says, Owen!”

“And why?”

“Because I say so.”

“Alright, alright,” the other man grumbled. “Opening rift manipulator now.”

“What do you need the power for?” Rose asked.
“It’s like a tow-rope for Earth.” The Doctor grinned at her manically and she grinned back. “Now we need all the computer power we can get.”

“Tosh?” Jack asked. “Anything you can give us?”

“There’s our computer, but that won’t be enough. The UNIT computer centre was destroyed when the Daleks hit Geneva. The same applies to the data centres of the Pentagon, basically all intelligence services, the NASA, ESA, you name it.”

“Damn!” Jack said.

“Wait!” A fourth voice made itself known, a woman with a Welsh accent. “What about... What was her name? There are rumours she’s got a computer that’s basically a Xylok.”

“Oh, I know who you mean, Gwen,” Tosh said. “You should know her, Doctor. Sarah Jane-“

“Smith,” the Doctor completed the sentence. “Can you contact her?”

“Doing it now, sir” a new voice said, and the Doctor looked up and stared at the speaker, looking thoughtful.

Less than two minutes later Sarah Jane Smith’s voice could be heard over the speakers. “Doctor?”

“Hello, Sarah!”

“Doctor, what’s going on? Someone from Torchwood called me and told me you needed help. Does that have something to do with the Daleks? They invaded us and then they suddenly retreated. Are they coming back?”

“The Daleks have been dealt with,” the Doctor said coldly. Then he continued, sounding warmer now, “We have to tow Earth back to where it belongs. We need a supercomputer to harness the power of the Cardiff rift and loop it round the TARDIS. Can you help us?”

“Sure. Mr Smith, did you get that?” Sarah Jane asked.

“I regret I will need remote access to the TARDIS base code,” the supercomputer announced.

“Sarah, K-9 should have them,” the Doctor said.

“Affirmative, Mistress.”

“The tin dog,” Mickey threw in, shooting a grin at Jack who grinned back.

“K-9, give Mr Smith the base codes,” the Doctor ordered.

“Master. TARDIS base code now being transferred.”

“Good dog,” the Doctor said, then turned to the people in the TARDIS. “Right. This is a bit more complicated than just flying the TARDIS-“

“And we all know you’re a rubbish driver,” Donna interrupted.

“Oi!” He shot her a glare, then continued, “therefore I’m gonna need a couple of additional hands to pilot her. Rose, that dial. You need to reach a level of 90. Go slow, because higher would be several kinds of bad. Jack, I need you to keep an eye on the temporal stabilisers.
Donna, hold that lever down, until I tell you differently. Mickey, that control. Activate those buttons when I tell you.”

He pulled a lever, then the time rotor began to move.

“Mickey, now!”

The other man pressed the buttons, one by one, and the status lights changed.

“Donna, flip your lever!”

For a full minute nothing happened. “Doctor?”

“Just watch!” He indicated a monitor that showed an image of the Medusa Cascade with Earth.

It was barely visible at first, but then it became clearer. The Earth was moving.

“It’s working!” Rose said, her eyes jumping between the dial and the monitor. “We’re at a level of 50 now, and increasing.”

“Remember, go slow. Jack, what about the stabilisers?”

“Looks good to me.”

Five minutes later, Rose announced. “We’ve reached a level of 90.”

“Jack?”

“Temporal stabilisers holding,” he said, exhaustion lacing his voice, then he yawned. “Sorry. Must be the adrenalin wearing off.”

The Doctor looked at the four humans in the console room. All of them were dead at their feet, and if he was honest for once, he wasn’t much better off.

“It’ll be at least twelve hours before we can start the braking action and bring the Earth back into orbit around the sun. Until then, all that’s left to do is occasionally checking the instruments. Go get some sleep.”

“What about you, Doc?” Jack asked.

“Need to check a couple of instruments we’re gonna need for the breaking action.”

Whatever it was that Jack saw in his face, he simply nodded, cast a glance at Donna and Mickey, and the three of them left the console room in search of a bedroom without any further comment, leaving the Doctor and Rose behind.
Chapter Twenty-Seven

Rose couldn’t tear her eyes away from the Doctor, still fearing she would wake up and this was just a dream. She wanted nothing more than to go to him, to bury herself in one of his bone-crushing hugs, but she seemed to be unable to move a single limb, or say something, for that matter. The Doctor looked back at her, his eyes filled with warmth, a tiny smile playing around his lips, but apparently equally at a loss for words. It had been so long, for both of them, so much had happened, and now... now she couldn’t even manage to talk to him. *Really* talk, not just an exchange of information like earlier. But the look in his eyes when she had agreed with him that the Daleks needed to be destroyed had driven home again what she had become, and she would tell him, even if it was going to kill her inside.

The bond was getting stronger, as the telepathic connection they had shared earlier had shown. One year ago she would have been overjoyed, but now everything had changed. Even if at this point the bond didn’t allow them to be in each other’s minds, at least not without physical contact or the help of the TARDIS, one day it would. And then he would know what she had done, would see her for what she was. She had changed so much during the last few years, done things she wasn’t proud of, and he certainly wouldn’t be proud of her, either. She had to give him the chance to undo this. She just couldn’t force him to tie himself to a person he possibly wouldn’t even recognise anymore, might despise even. Losing him would destroy what was still left of her heart, but she had to take the risk, for both of them. All she wanted was a few more minutes during which she could pretend that it was going to be alright.

Apparently the Doctor had sensed her need for a short reprieve, because he said, “I’ll just have a look at the gravitic anomaliser. I haven’t used it in ages, but we’re gonna need it for the braking action.”

She nodded, leaning against a coral strut to watch him check the instrument.

Eventually the Doctor reappeared from under the grating, wiped his hands on a rag and leaned against the console, thoroughly exhausted. Once again he just looked at her, as if he still wasn’t quite sure that she was real. She returned his gaze. An awkward silence settled in the console room.

“It’s still a couple of hours until we reach our destination,” he said finally. “Come to bed? Just to take a nap?”

It was unusual for him to suggest a break, a sign how tired he really was, and Rose appreciated that he was being so open, but she couldn’t do this, couldn’t simply go back to what they had been. Not with all those things she needed to tell him first. “What about the TARDIS?” she asked evasively.

“She’ll alert me if something is wrong. What do you say?”

Rose shook her head.

It was barely there, but she could see that she had hurt him. She winced inwardly and tried to gather...
her courage. This was going to be one of the hardest things she’d ever done. She didn’t want to, but she had to tell him what she had done.

“What’s wrong, Rose?” She could hear the confusion in his voice, although he tried to keep it carefully neutral.

She stared at the grating, unable to meet his eyes. “Something happened.”

He left his place at the console, came over and cupped her face. “Rose, look at me. You can tell me anything, you know that.”

She winced again, visibly this time. She knew the offer was genuine, which made it only harder.

“What’s wrong, Rose?” She asked, avoiding his glance. Anything to put it off, if only for a few too short minutes.

He nodded and followed her to the galley. Without another word she opened the cupboards, pulled out two mugs and set about to make tea, the motions almost automatic. Everything was exactly where she remembered it to be, the only thing that had changed was she. She didn’t have to look at him to know that he was leaning against the doorframe. She could feel his eyes on her back, as if he wanted to look into her very soul. The intensity of his gaze was almost scorching her. She filled the kettle with water and set it down on the hotplate too hard.

With shaking fingers she tried to put the kettle on, but stopped herself before she even touched the knob. She turned around, leaned against the counter and took a deep breath, focusing on a white bobble on his jumper. He deserved to know. When she finally began to speak her voice was almost devoid of emotion.

“Some time ago we were attacked. They never said who they were, and we never found out. They just appeared on every TV screen on the planet and told us that Earth now was part of their empire. We hadn’t even seen their invasion fleet coming, despite the alliances with other alien races we had built. Negotiations failed, and then someone launched a nuclear missile at them.”

She laughed shakily and without as much as a trace of humour. “It was like throwing pebbles in the general direction of an elephant. The missiles didn’t even reach them, let alone cause any damage. For a couple of hours nothing happened, and in another act of sheer idiocy somebody decided to lift the curfew the government had enforced in an attempt to keep people safe. Not that it would have made much of a difference.” She took another deep breath to keep her voice from shaking.

“We thought there would be just a conventional attack. Turned out we were wrong. A couple of hours after the ultimatum they began to transmat people. Ten thousand a day, at first, then hundred thousand a day. Men, women, children. My little brother was lucky. Pete had taken him to day care in Torchwood Tower that morning, so mam would have the day to herself, and the Torchwood building was shielded. But mam... She hated all those curfews the politicians imposed all the time, said it was not right. But this time... If they hadn’t lifted the curfew, maybe... But they did, and she went shopping. They took her during the first wave, before anyone noticed what was going on.”

The Doctor made a step in her direction, but she shook her head. “No. Please. Let me finish first.” For the first time since she had begun to speak she looked him in the eyes. “Please, Doctor.” She hugged herself, the only form of contact she could bear right now. If he so much as touched her she would shatter into pieces.

He nodded silently and leaned against the wall next to the door.
With great effort she kept her voice from wavering. “Mum... she called me before she left the house and asked if I wanted something. She said she would drop by my flat and leave it for me. I was... I dunno what I was. A half pint of milk, vegetables and rice, I told her. Then my supervisor called and I hung up. The last time I spoke to my mum and it was about milk, vegetables and rice. I didn’t think. I should have told her that it wasn’t over yet, that she should stay inside. Maybe...” She trailed off.

“Oh, Rose...”

She held out her hand, in a gesture intended to silence him, and he complied. She was grateful for that. Right now she couldn’t bear his sympathy. Her mum was gone and it was her fault. She turned around and faced the kettle. Her eyes traced the familiar little scratches in the metal, the dent where it had hit the floor during a particularly rough landing, because the TARDIS had been furious at the Doctor, then her gaze settled on a scratch she had never seen before. She blinked rapidly. She was not going to fall apart now, not before she had told him everything. She heard him shift his weight, but he didn’t move otherwise and stayed silent.

After a long minute she had finally managed to pull herself together. She turned back to him and continued her tale, still looking everywhere but at him. “It took us hours to figure out what was going on, and even longer before we were certain that mum had been among those who were caught in a transmat. People just vanished from the face of the earth, from streets, parks. Not even buildings were safe, as long as they weren’t shielded.

“Then everyone began to avoid the surface. They hid in tunnels or even sewers. The people who found a place in the Tube were among the luckier ones, but there were tens of thousands who sought shelter in the canalisation. People began to fight about space in the tunnels, food, water. Some left, to get groceries or to search for beloved ones, and they never came back. Some were caught in the transmats, but others... I saw more bodies than I ever want to remember that had been stabbed, shot, strangled, you name it. It went on for weeks, the transmats and the killings. Then, three months after the initial attack, my brother vanished.”

Her voice broke. This had been the day she lost faith in humanity, the day a part of her heart had turned into stone.

She balled her hands, trying to fight the tears, and closed her eyes. She heard a few quick steps and two arms engulfed her in a tight embrace. The wool of his jumper scraped against her cheek, and she could feel his chin resting on the crown of her head.

“You don’t have to tell me, Rose,” he murmured.

The temptation was almost irresistible, but she wouldn’t build their future relationship on lies, not even lies of omission. She drew back a little, so she could look him in the eyes. “But I do.”

The Doctor nodded.

“Library?”

“No.” She was certain she couldn’t bear one of the comfy leather chairs in the library. She didn’t want comfy. She didn’t deserve comfy. And she certainly didn’t deserve this. She disentangled herself from his arms and leaned back against the counter. The Doctor took her hand and leaned against the fridge next to her. She didn’t know why, but for the first time his hand in hers felt as if it didn’t quite fit.

“What happened?” he asked, his eyes focused on a spot on the opposite wall. He was clearly sensing that she didn’t want to look at him right now. When this was over he probably wouldn’t want to look
at her anymore either, let alone hold her hand.

“There were almost fifty children of all ages in Torchwood day care at the day of the attack. We couldn’t get a hold of mum that evening, and since Pete and I stayed, Tony stayed, too, like most of the other children. It turned out, a few of them suffered the same fate. One parent working for Torchwood, the other vanished. Not necessarily because the aliens took them, but the result remained the same.

“One day a few of the older children decided to do a little tour through the building. Tony followed them. No one of the care workers noticed, not until it was too late. There was a door in sublevel C we used to enter the sewers and the Tube tunnels to get to other places of the city without being seen on the surface. It was always locked, except this time someone had left it slightly ajar.”

The Doctor squeezed her hand, but the gesture failed to reassure her.

Her voice cracked, but she ventured on. “Mickey called me as soon as he found out that Tony had vanished.”

Rose gulped. Whenever she thought about it she was back in the darkness, reliving those long hours in the tunnels they had searched for Tony. For some time she was silent, but eventually she gathered her courage and told him what she had done.

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“How long for you?” he asked, after a pause that was filled with a ringing silence.

Rose closed her eyes.

“Since the invasion? A year,” she admitted finally.

He took a step away from the fridge, let go of her hand and faced her, his body radiating tension. “A year?”

She was going to lose him, she knew it. He was already detaching himself from her. During the last few years she had felt empty without him, but the simple act of him dropping her hand made everything else pale in comparison.

“A year,” she confirmed, still trying to process the sudden loss of his hand.

“You lied to me,” he concluded, hurt and barely contained anger evident in his voice.

She stayed silent.

“We met twice during the last twelve months of your timeline, before the dreams stopped, and you said everything was fine.”

He paused, waiting for her to say something, but she couldn’t. He was right, she had lied and she had no justification.

“Why didn’t you tell me, Rose?”

She avoided his gaze and stared at her feet.

“Look at me. Please.”

Although he uttered the request gently it raised her hackles. “I’m not a child, so stop talking to me
like that,” she burst out, sounding harsher than she intended.

“Then don’t behave like one,” he fired back, apparently more hurt by her lie than he had let on at first.

She became angry. “Yeah, that would have been a fun conversation. What did you expect? You ask if I’m fine and I tell you that since we last saw each other I killed the man that tried to eat my little brother and left his body to rot?” Her voice was ringing in her ears.

“Why not?” he asked, once again sounding more or less calm. “Do you really think that would have made any difference to me?”

Rose ignored him. “Oh yeah, and I probably should have mentioned that my mum being gone is my fault, too.” She looked at him. “But that wouldn’t have been a problem for you, would it? You hated her.” She laughed almost cruelly. “So be happy, I’ll never bother you with my domestics again.”

The Doctor winced visibly. “That was completely uncalled for, Rose, and you know it’s not true.”

“It’s not? Well, in that case you’ve got an interesting way of showing how much you liked her,” she gave back acridly.

“You didn’t even tell me that something happened to her, Rose. Until half an hour ago I thought she was safe and sound back on Pete’s world, raising your little brother and spending Pete’s money.” He paused briefly and continued. “You agreed to bond with me. I’m going to be your husband, and you didn’t tell me about her. What do you think that says about us?” He was getting louder.

“And now you’re going to tell me that you’re grieving for her.” Her voice was dripping with sarcasm.

He took a deep breath, trying to calm down. “Rose, that Jackie and I didn’t get along doesn’t mean I hated her.”

“Oh, you never would. Because you’re a Time Lord, and Time Lords are above things like hatred,” she interrupted him.

A short, bitter laugh without even a trace of humour escaped him. “Rose, you’ve got no idea about Time Lords and hatred, really, you don’t. If you had, you’d be running from me as fast as you could.” He was silent for a moment. “What do you want to hear? The truth is that Jackie and I would never have got along swimmingly, but she’s your mum and I respect her for that. I don’t hate her. I never did.”

“That’s a lie.” She couldn’t seem to stop provoking him, and she didn’t even know why.

He was about to explode, she could see it, but he somehow managed to hold back. “Rose, I’ll say it again: I don’t hate Jackie, and I’m really sorry she passed on.” He took another deep breath, trying to calm himself further. “But what I really want to know is why you didn’t just tell me.”

She could hear genuine compassion in his voice but she decided to focus on something else instead. “Oh, great. You get to decide that the subject is closed and what we’re gonna talk about? Who do you think you are? As you pointed out before, I’m going to be your bloody bond mate, so don’t treat me like I’m a stupid ape that just hitched a ride, or someone you just took to bed because there wasn’t anybody else to keep it warm!” She was yelling, and she didn’t care.

He winced as if she had hit him physically. “Do you really think that? That this is nothing more than a cheap affair for me? Because if you do, then you don’t know me at all.” He was getting louder as
well, the anger rising again.

No, she wanted to say, but kept silent nonetheless. She might still know him, but she didn’t know herself any longer. The girl who would even defend a Dalek against the Doctor was gone, replaced by a coldblooded murderer. And if he decided to undo their bond because of that, she deserved no less. The only thing she still could do was to walk out with her head held high.

She took a deep breath, straightened and turned towards the door.

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The Doctor had no idea what was happening, just that he was going to lose her if he didn’t do something about it. She had always been so strong, but losing Jackie and almost losing her little brother had shaken her to the core, and she seemed unable to come to terms with what she’d had to do. And then she’d apparently taken a leaf from his book and run, first figuratively, and now she was trying to do it literally as well. Well, he wasn’t going to let her.

Before she had taken more than a few steps towards the door, he gripped her wrist, then forced her to turn around.

“Where do you think you’re going?” he hissed, his eyes boring into hers. He didn’t even try to conceal his anger anymore.

“My room. The wardrobe room. Jack’s room. I really don’t care as long as you’re somewhere else.” She tried to pry his fingers open, but he didn’t let her go.

“Oh no, I don’t think so. Not until we’ve gotten everything out in the open.”

She tried to calm herself down, and eventually she succeeded. “So now it’s talking? Two minutes ago you decided that you didn’t want to talk about something, and that was that,” she gave back coolly. She stared at the hand that was gripping her wrist then met his gaze. He regarded her for some time, then he let her go. If she really wanted to leave, he would let her, even though it was already killing him inside.

Rose turned around again to leave the room, but she had only taken two or three steps towards the door when he said, “I’d never have thought you’d be a coward. Me, any day. But you? Never.” He said it calmly, without contempt, but it shattered the facade she had struggled to maintain during the last hour.

The tears came, finally, and she collapsed on the floor. Heavy sobs shook her entire body. In an instant he was kneeling next to her and cradling her in a tight embrace. She turned around and buried her face in his jumper like a frightened child. One of his hands drew soothing circles on her back.

He knew he had been an outright bastard in the last couple of minutes. He had pushed her to her breaking point and beyond, and he only hoped she would forgive him for that, sooner or later. But he had learned the hard way that bottling up one’s emotions never went well. Not that he ever followed his own advice.

After a long time she calmed down. “Sorry,” she mumbled into the wool of his jumper.

“Don’t be.” He pressed a kiss on the crown of her head.

“But I am. I know you wouldn’t lie to me. I shouldn’t have said that.” She looked him in the eyes.

“Shhh.” He gave her a wry grin. “Believe me, I’ve been called worse.”
She returned the grin shakily. “I can imagine.” She paused. “Look at us. Not really good at talking, are we?”

“I guess it needs some practice.”

They stayed silent for a long time, cuddled together in a messy heap on the floor of the galley. Both of them seemed reluctant to let each other go.

Eventually the Doctor got up and tugged at her hand. “Come.”

She looked at him questioningly.

“Bed,” he said. “You can tell me everything else tomorrow.”

Rose raised her eyebrows. “Are you sending me to my room?” she asked, with a trace of asperity in her voice.

“Actually I was planning on accompanying you to our room,” he gave back with a slight grin.

“You want to...?”

“No!” he gave back. Seeing her expression change from confused to irritated, to outright dangerous he added quickly, “Well, not unless you want to...”

She smiled, the first genuine smile he had seen since their initial meeting a few hours ago. “No. I’m just... I’m tired, Doctor.”

He smiled back. “Me, too.” He stretched out his hand. She took it without hesitation, and finally, for the first time in more than a year, he felt complete again.

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They made their way through the ship in silence. Rose took in the familiar corridors she hadn't seen for more than seven years. On the surface nothing had changed, but the ship felt different to her. She wasn't sure if that was because she had changed, or the Doctor had, or both of them. She ran her fingers lightly over the coral-like structure of the walls and smiled.

“She missed you,” the Doctor said.

“I missed her, too.” She patted the wall. “Thanks, girl.” For bridging the Void, for keeping him safe, she added mentally. The ship’s constant hum dropped an octave in acknowledgement.

Finally they reached their destination. The Doctor looked at her questioningly, as if he expected her to bolt. Her eyes didn't leave his when she laid her hand on the handle and opened the door.

For a moment she stopped on the threshold, taking everything in. The room looked like she remembered it, the dim light, the large wooden bed, the material so dark it looked almost black, the silver-grey duvet covers. Even the book she had been reading was still on the nightstand on her side of the bed, the bookmark sticking out somewhere in the middle.

“You didn’t change anything,” she said.

“No,” he gave back. “Well, I might have bought a new jumper or two, but apart from that... nothing.”

“Why?”
“You know why.”

She did. Changing something would have meant that he was giving up, and he wouldn’t have done that.

“Let’s go to bed, yeah?” she said, already slipping out of her blue leather jacket. She divested herself of her clothes, until she was wearing just a t-shirt and knickers, then slid under the duvet. The Doctor followed suit, silently asking the TARDIS to dim the light even more.

Surrounded by shadows, her features barely visible, Rose finally began to speak, her voice just above a whisper. “I didn’t want to tell you. I craved these moments, these short periods outside of space and time when I didn’t feel hungry, or dirty, or exhausted. Just loved. Completely, without conditions. The dreams were the one thing that kept me sane, that gave me hope, that told me that there still was something else out there, not just madness and misery.”

“Rose...”

“No, let me finish. You were right before, you know. I was a coward. Most of all I was afraid I’d lose you. I was certain I would if I told you,” she said into the silence, staring at the ceiling.

“Told me what?”

“That I killed somebody, Doctor. I killed this man and I don’t even regret it. I never will.”

He stared at her in utter astonishment. “Rose, you know me. You know what I’ve done in the War. You’ve seen me at my worst and stayed, and now you think you’d lose me because you killed somebody who threatened your brother?”

She sat up and looked down at him. “I wanted them dead, Doctor. All of them. Not just the bloke who was holding a knife at Tony’s throat. I looked at the scene and my only thought was that being killed by a Dalek death ray would be more humane. I exterminated him. I probably would have killed the others, too, if Mickey hadn’t stopped me.” She averted her eyes and stared at the duvet. “That Dalek in the bunker in Utah was a better person than me.”

He had never heard her sound so lifeless before. He sat up as well and took her hand. “No, Rose. Don’t ever think that. You only did what you had to do to save your brother. It was the only thing you could do.”

“But I wanted to kill them!”

“That’s the point, Rose. You wanted to, but you didn’t.”

“But I would have done it. If Mickey hadn’t stopped me, I would have killed them.”

He shook his head. “If you really had wanted to kill them, Mickey wouldn’t have been able to stop you.”

“But...”

He pressed a finger to her lips, silencing her. “Let me tell you a story.” He lay back on the pillow, tugging her down with him.

“The last great Time War was unlike any war I had ever seen before. It spanned entire galaxies and covered millennia. I spent years of my last life trying to preserve timelines. More than once, whole civilisations were destroyed because the timelines shifted. But not on Gallifrey, never on Gallifrey.
“Gallifrey was different. It was the eye of the storm that was the Time War. In the beginning some people didn’t even believe that there was a war going on, because the planet was protected against direct attacks and the effects of severed timelines. Only the most powerful Time Lords were able to cross Gallifrey’s timeline, but there were strict laws against it, because we were afraid someone would mess up our entire history. Everyone who tried was punished severely.

“For a long time we were able to hold the Daleks and their allies back, to undo their actions, but eventually the lines broke and the war came to Gallifrey. We desperately needed reinforcements. I chose to ignore yet another of my people’s rules and went back in time.

“In my fourth life I had a companion, Leela, who fell in love with the commander of the Gallifreyan Chancellory Guard and decided to stay.” He looked at her, his steel-blue eyes never leaving hers. “I am a manipulator, Rose. It’s not always as obvious as in my seventh life, but basically that’s what I am. I use people to my advantage. You, Jack, Donna, Sarah, even Mickey or Harriet Jones. In this case I used what I had seen of Leela’s timeline to persuade her and her husband to help, and I can’t even promise I’ll never do the same to you.”

Rose took his hand, pressed a kiss into his palm. “You were a soldier, trying to protect your planet. You used every resource you had. That doesn’t make you selfish or manipulative, Doctor. I would have done the same. I did the same.” She winced, as if she regretted her last sentence.

He knew she hadn’t told him everything that had happened since they had been separated. But he also knew that she would have been one of those who had to make the tough decisions. She would have done it, but it would have been killing her inside. As it killed him, every time a bit more. She had become so much like him, and it was his fault.

Another bitter laugh escaped him. “Rose, I’m more than a thousand years old. Don’t you think I know that I didn’t have a choice?” He paused and continued after a few seconds, “One year later, there was a battle. We were on Skaro, trying to stop their unlimited supply of reinforcements. I never found out what exactly happened, but Leela was captured and then held prisoner, for weeks. The Daleks hadn’t killed her because they wanted to use her as bait for us. When her husband and I found her, she was all skin and bones. She had burn marks everywhere and her entire body was covered with bruises. But the worst thing was that nothing was left of her personality. She had been a proud and honourable warrior of her people and then of mine, a champion of the universe, and the Daleks had broken her spirit, and she begged us to let her die. To see her reduced to this... Andred brought her back to safety and I shook off the last shreds of restraint and became someone you’d barely recognise. Let’s just say, what I did to avenge her is one of the reasons the Daleks fear the Oncoming Storm.” His voice had become cold, almost completely bare of emotions.

He could feel her shiver and took her hand. “What I did was born out of hatred. We had already saved her. Andred tried to stop me, but I didn’t. I wanted revenge, nothing more. A Dalek for a bruise.” More like a battalion of Daleks for a bruise, he thought, but he would never tell her that, and he certainly would never tell her what he would be willing to do if anybody ever made the mistake to hurt Rose. He still wondered why she had stayed after he had told her what he had almost done when the TARDIS had crashed on Skaro.

He emphasized his next words. “What you did was something completely different.” He cupped her cheek. “Rose, you did what you had to do to save your brother, nothing more, nothing less, and you did it out of love for him. That doesn’t make you a bad person. Believe me, it doesn’t. It makes you someone who cares.”

She nodded slowly, still not entirely convinced.

“Come here,” he said.
After a moment of hesitation that was almost too short to be recognised for what it was, she snuggled into his arms.

He pressed a kiss to her forehead. “We can talk about everything else tomorrow, Rose. For now, just let us sleep.” There was something like a plea in his voice.

She nodded almost imperceptibly, and eventually sleep claimed her.

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Three hours later, of which he had spent the first two sleeping and the last watching the woman lying next to him, the Doctor disentangled himself from the bed sheets and donned his clothes. He was loath to leave Rose, but he needed to check the instruments.

After he had confirmed that they were still on course and that the tow rope was holding, he went to the galley for a mug of tea. When he opened the door he found Mickey sitting at the table, already nursing a cuppa. He prepared his own mug and took a seat as well.

“Where’s Rose?” Mickey asked eventually.

“Sleeping. She’s exhausted.”

Mickey nodded. “She hasn’t been sleeping well. Not since...” He trailed off, apparently not certain what he should tell the Doctor.

“Not since the invasion,” the Doctor concluded, recognising Mickey’s hesitation for what it was: an attempt to protect Rose. “She told me what happened with Jackie and Tony. She blames herself for it.”

“Yeah, she’s like you in that regard.” Mickey shot the Doctor a hard look. “It was pretty bad. She still hasn’t come to terms with it. With any of it. Since the day Tony was born she has always been very protective of him, and when he was abducted... I’ve tried to tell her that she had no choice, but she doesn’t believe me. And Jackie... Before that day in the tunnels Rose refused to acknowledge that Jackie was dead. She kept telling us that the aliens would want something if they transmatted people.”

“Well, she has a point there.”

“Yeah. But she didn’t even want to think about the possibility. Then she had to shoot that guy, and even though she did it to save Tony, she still blames herself. I think the last straw was that the Nameless just disappeared one day. Until then there still was a chance that we would get Jackie and all the others back, but afterwards... I can’t be certain, but I think she believes that Jackie being gone is somehow her punishment for wanting not only to kill the guy holding a knife at Tony’s throat, but also the other scumbags.”

The Doctor stared at Mickey. “She thinks... what?”

“You don’t have to tell me that that’s rubbish, Doctor, I know that. And if you ask me, the world would be a better place if the other thugs had died, too, but this is Rose we’re talking about.”

Once again the two men shared another long look, then Mickey got up. “I’ll try to catch another couple of hours sleep.” At the door he turned around again. “Help her, Doctor. Please.”
The Doctor nodded, acknowledging Mickey’s words, even though he currently had no idea what to do. He stared at the empty mug in his fingers, lost in thought, and that’s how Donna found him.

~o~o~o~

“From what you’ve told me, Rose either thinks that her mum being abducted by those aliens is her fault or that she deserves losing her for wanting to do something she didn’t follow through with, and that she might lose you for exactly the same thing,” Donna summarized what the Doctor had just told her.

“Pretty much, yeah. I’ve tried to tell her that that’s not gonna happen, but I’m not sure she believes me.”

“You know, Doctor, for someone who claims to be a genius, you can be exceptionally thick at times,” she said conversationally.

The Doctor glared at her. “Donna...”

“Shut it, spaceman, and listen to me, because I’m going to explain 21th century human female to you. Telling her that is all good and well, but for us stupid humans sometimes that’s not enough. There are times when we have to see to believe. I’ve no idea what you can do about the first part of her problem, unless you find a way to save her mum, but you need to show her that she’s not gonna lose you.”

“But-”

She interrupted him, looking at him as if he had just dribbled on his jumper. “Doctor, if you can use your connection to show her to fly the TARDIS, you can surely use it to show her what she means to you.”

He stared at her, then broke into a smile. “Donna, you’re brilliant!”

She grinned at him. “Call me Donna Noble, Supertemp.”

~o~o~o~

Rose stretched under the sheets and yawned. She had had the best sleep in years, the best since...

Then she suddenly realised where she was and sat up. “It’s real.”

“I know the feeling,” the Doctor commented, and she turned to look at him. He was leaning against the headboard, clad in jeans and a jumper, a book in his lap.

“I thought... you’d be gone when I wake up,” she said, suddenly remembering what had happened between them before she’d fallen asleep.

He shook his head. “I checked a couple of instruments and went to the galley for a mug of tea, but...” He paused and just took her in, then continued, “I needed to know you’re really here.”

“I don’t plan to go anywhere. Unless...”

“Unless what?”

“Unless you send me away.” She couldn’t keep her voice from shaking.

“I won’t.”
“But…”

“I won’t,” he emphasised his earlier words. “Let me show you something,” he said, reaching for her hand. She gave it to him without hesitation, and he carefully placed her fingers at his temple.

“You want to look into my mind?”

He shook his head. “No. I want you to look into mine. To see me for what I am, and to see you the way I do.” He gave her an encouraging smile. “Just follow your instincts.”

For the second time in just a few hours she closed her eyes and concentrated, searching for the place deep within her mind where her connection with both the TARDIS and the Doctor was located. But this time she didn’t stop there. Instead she carefully spread her attention, not wanting to lose her concentration, but also instinctively knowing that she needed to follow the feeling of her fingers touching the Doctor’s temple. For a millisecond there was resistance, until it was suddenly gone.

She found herself in a cavernous room that reminded her of the console room on the TARDIS, just without the console, and with several archways leading away from it, each of the arches decorated with carvings. Looking around, she noticed something she had not expected, not after watching the Doctor with Madame de Pompadour all those years ago, and especially not after him explaining in length about the necessity of shielding her mind.

“There are... no barriers, no closed doors,” she said in astonishment.

“I don’t need them. Not with you. All that I am, it’s yours - forever,” he told her earnestly, and she could feel the sincerity of his words reverberating in his mind.

“And what happens now?”

The room around her sparkled with his amusement. “Well, I could show you something, or you could take a tour first.”

“You wouldn’t mind?”

“I wouldn’t have suggested it if I didn’t mean it, Rose.”

There was no hesitation, no doubt in his words. The offer was genuine, and that was all she needed to know.

“What did you want to show me?”

One of the archways suddenly began to glow, and she moved towards it. When she had reached it, she hesitated for a moment, absently noting that the carvings resembled those of the door to her old room on the TARDIS. Then she stepped through the arch, suddenly overwhelmed by memories and emotions.

*His joy when she had agreed to come with him.*

*The insecurity when he’d brought her back to Earth after she had seen her planet burn, the underlying guilt because he had put her through this, the relief when she hadn’t demanded to go home, and finally something else he hadn’t been able to put a label on yet.*

*Being unable to do what he had to do, because he might lose her, and her unwavering faith in him.*

*Having his feelings for her shoved into his face by a Dalek, of all things, fear that she would die, and*
relief when she was still alive.

*Her in a hot pink sleep shirt, grumpy before her first cup of tea, but lovely nonetheless.*

*Her acceptance and compassion when he told her what he had done to end the Time War.*

*His jealousy when seeing her with Jack, and wondering if she had really meant what he thought she had meant during their conversation about dancing.*

*A golden goddess, risking her own life for his, and his horror when her heart stopped for a few brief seconds that had felt like an eternity.*

“You never even told me,” she managed, slowly gaining on the emotional onslaught.

“I was afraid,” he admitted.

“Of what?”

“That you’d decide this life wasn’t for you after all. That I’d lose you.”

*The moment he decided to move forward instead of stepping back, unable to fight his feelings anymore, and no longer wanting to.*

*Watching her sleep afterwards, and almost every night after that, until...*  

*Canary Wharf, and the desperation that came with it.*

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“What for?”

“If I had held onto that lever...”

“Not your fault.”

“Not yours, either.”

*The hope when he realised that the bond was forming.*

*Her holding him when he told her about Skaro.*

*His hearts breaking for her when she told him how much she had wanted to kill the people who had abducted her beloved little brother, and his guilt because she had become so much like him.*  

*And always, underlying every memory, interwoven with every emotion, his all-encompassing love for her.*

She broke the connection and opened her eyes again, meeting his. Finally she understood what he had been trying to tell her, but what she had been unable to hear over the thoughts churning in her mind.

“I love you, too,” she whispered, tears in her eyes.

“Shhh, don’t cry,” he said, cupping her cheek, then kissed her gently, barely touching her lips.

She sighed against him, parting her lips, and that was all the invitation he needed. He deepened the kiss, his tongue gliding against hers, making love to her mouth as if he wanted to devour her, and she
responded fervently. It was probably too early, after all that had happened between them, but right now she didn’t care. She had missed him so much. The times they had seen each other in their dreams had helped, but it hadn’t been nearly enough.

Finally the Doctor broke the kiss and tugged at her t-shirt. The small gesture was enough to break the moment and reminded her of all the other things she had yet to tell him. Before he could remove the garment she crossed her arms over her chest in an instinctive gesture and shook her head, suddenly afraid what he might think.

He seemed to sense that something was wrong and let go of her, even retreated a bit. She winced. That felt like he was rejecting her. Intellectually she knew he wouldn’t do that, that he was just trying to give her space, but that didn’t help her sudden emotional confusion.

“Rose?” he asked tentatively.

She met his eyes and took a deep breath. Before she could think about it any longer, she removed her shirt, because if she did she’d probably chicken out.

The Doctor stared at her, for the moment unable to process what he was seeing. Then the analytical part of his brain kicked into gear, informing him with clinical precision about the nature of her injuries. Sometime during the last six years she had been attacked by something with rather impressive claws, received at least three graze wounds and what looked like a stab wound next to her navel, but it couldn’t have been deep, because otherwise she most likely would have died. She would have died, and he’d never have known. His blood ran cold, and he closed his eyes for a moment. He didn’t even have to ask why she hadn’t told him. She would have assumed that he would only blame himself, for not securing her to that lever or for not getting to her sooner.

When he opened his eyes again Rose had the t-shirt in hand, about to don it again. He plucked the garment out of her fingers, a smile playing around his lips.

“What do you think you’re doing, Rose?”

She looked at him questioningly.

He raised his eyebrows. “Last time I looked, making love to you worked better when we both were naked. Not that I mind shagging you senseless against any convenient surface when you’re still more or less clothed, but right now I prefer you in our bed wearing as little as possible.”

A tiny smile appeared on her face.

The Doctor smiled back and touched her shoulder to indicate that she should lie down. She complied and he knelt on the bed. Then he bent down to kiss the claw scars on her left shoulder and the remnants of the graze wound on her right, one of his thumbs drawing small circles on her waist, his other hand stroking the soft skin on her thigh. Studiously ignoring her chest, he moved to a mark two inches below her breast and pressed a kiss on the small scar. He kissed every single mark on her body until he reached the scar next to her navel. By then she was squirming beneath him, and he could smell her arousal.

“Doctor, please...”

“Please what?”

“Touch me. Please.” There was a touch of impatience in her voice, a sentiment he understood all too well. It had been much too long for both of them. And even though he wanted nothing more than to bury himself in her heat, to reassure himself that she was really here, with him, he decided to savour
the moment. The universe owed them that much.

“Oh, I intend to. Eventually.” He gave her a positively filthy smile, hooked his fingers under the waistband of her knickers and removed the garment. Then he sat back, and for a few moments he did nothing but look at her, still fearing that it was just a dream and he would wake up. Rose Tyler naked and aroused on their bed was the most beautiful image he had ever seen in all his lives.

“Are you gonna stare at me all day or are you gonna make love to me, Doctor?” Rose asked, shaking him out of his thoughts. She gave him one of her tongue-in-cheek grins he had missed so much. “Even though that might work better if you were naked as well.”

“Then do something about it,” he challenged.

Needing no further encouragement, she moved to kneel in front of him and pulled his jumper over his head in one swift move. For a moment she stared at the planes of his torso, then ran her hands over his chest, as if mapping the territory. Next she attacked the buttons of his jeans with nimble fingers, opening them one after one, revealing his straining erection to her.

She stroked his shaft, using the liquid she found at the top as a lubricant, and he hardened even more. Then she bent forward and lightly ran her tongue along his erection, teasing him until he was ready to throw every intention of taking his time overboard.

He groaned. “Rose...”

She stopped immediately and sat back on her heels, now lightly circling the top of his cock with her fingers, looking him in the eyes. “Like that?”

He took a deep breath in order to get himself back under control. “Minx.” He snatched her hand, sucking at her fingers until she moaned, then he got up and removed his jeans.

Rose moved to lie back onto the bed, her eyes never leaving his. Then she smiled invitingly, her legs falling open, revealing her to him.

He wouldn’t have been able to look away if he had tried. He settled between her legs, trapping his aching erection between his body and the mattress, then blew lightly against her clit. She bucked on the bed, one of her feet almost hitting his face. He grinned at the reaction and caught both her legs in a firm grip to avoid a repetition. Then he started licking her clit, setting a lazy pattern that was mirrored by her fingers lightly massaging his scalp.

He had almost forgotten how it felt, how she felt, how she tasted. Even though the dreams had seemed real to him, they had still lacked that specific spark of life that only could be found in the physical world, that one thing that all those life forms that had ascended could never experience again. And nothing could ever compare to really holding Rose in his arms, making love to her.

He entered her with a finger, and she moaned. Loudly. He briefly paused in his ministrations and looked up, taking her in. She was flushed with arousal, her breath laboured, her pupils dilated, and the hand that wasn’t currently caressing his head was playing with her nipples.

“Like that?” he repeated her earlier question, grinning at her filthily.

“Don’t stop,” she managed in between ragged breaths.

“I take that as a ‘yes’,” he gave back and resumed tormenting her with tongue and that single finger, until she was writhing with pleasure.
“Doctor, please. I need you. I need to feel you.”

Even though he had wanted to take his time, his resolve crumbled at the sight of her on their bed. She disarmed him, every time. He abandoned her clit and moved up until their bodies were aligned. He entered her with one powerful thrust, and she groaned, the sound of pleasure laced with a trace of discomfort.

“Rose? Are you...”

She kissed him, silencing him effectively, then gave him a small smile. “Sorry. It’s been awhile. I just need a moment to adjust.”

She wrapped her legs around him, wriggling a bit. After a few seconds she began to move, and he picked up the slow rhythm she was setting. He bent down to kiss her, his tongue mapping out her mouth once again, then moved to her neck, nipping and sucking at the soft skin, while she ran her hands over the muscles on his back. She moaned against him, and he took that as his cue to increase the pace. His strokes got longer, more powerful, and she met him thrust for thrust.

He slid one hand between their bodies, lightly stroking her clit, eliciting another moan from her. He grinned and repeated the motion. In response her fingernails dug into the muscles on his back and he groaned. He thrust into her harder and increased his speed even more, until his motions became almost frantic. His control was slipping, but he didn’t care anymore. He needed this, needed her.

She moaned. “Doctor!”

“Come for me, Rose,” he nearly begged. Once again he stroked her clit, with more pressure than before, and that was enough to send her over the edge. She shattered around him, her inner muscles clenching convulsively, drawing him along.

Eventually he collapsed on top of her, completely spent. She held him, softly caressing his head with one hand, the other gliding over the smooth muscles of his back. Eventually he turned them, still buried in her. He didn’t want to let her go, not yet. Not ever, if he could help it. Right now he needed to be connected to her, to reassure himself that this was really happening, that she had found her way back to him. He caressed her back and gently tucked a strand of hair behind her ear that had fallen into her face. She sighed against him, her body draped over his almost bonelessly.

Eventually he slipped out of her, still loath to stop touching her, and they moved until she was spooned against him.

“There’s something that just occurred to me,” he said eventually.

She turned slightly to look at him. “And that is?”

“I love you.”

“It just occurred to you that you love me?” she asked, confused.

“No.” He smiled at her. “It just occurred to me that I never told you in person.”

She smiled back. “I love you, too.”

Then she snuggled back into him, and he gently ran his hand over her arm until she finally drifted off to sleep.

He lightly kissed the crown of her head, wondering what else had happened to her in the last six
years. This wasn’t the Rose he had last kissed in the TARDIS, before they had left his ship to visit her mum. This also wasn’t the Rose he had made love to in a pavilion that only existed in their minds. He probably wasn’t the same person either. He knew they couldn’t simply continue where they had left off, that they needed to get to know each other again. It wouldn’t be easy, but it would be worth it.

If only he could help her to find out what had happened to Jackie. As he had already told Mickey, Rose had a point when she thought that the Nameless would never have abducted all those humans without a reason. And even though she had given up on the belief that Jackie was still alive, that didn’t mean it was true. The walls between universes were still open, so maybe there still was a chance to get her back.

If it were anybody else, the odds would be somewhere below zero, but with Rose back at his side, maybe it was time to eliminate ‘impossible’ from his vocabulary.

And just before he followed Rose into sleep, the first outline of a plan began to form in his mind.

The End

(is just the beginning)

Chapter End Notes

This fic has been a long ride for me, in every sense of the word, and it took me just about seven and a half years to finish it. I live in hope that the sequel won't take me that long (currently I'm estimating ten chapters at the most, and three are already mostly written). I'll post the prologue some time next week, and then maybe once or twice a month, depending on how the writing goes. In the meantime, look out for cleaned up versions of a couple of fics I posted on Teaspoon and ff.net ages ago.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!